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JULY/AUGUST 1999

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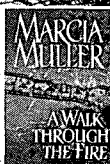
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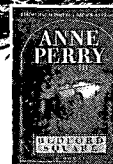
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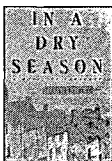
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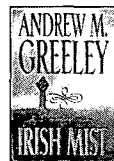
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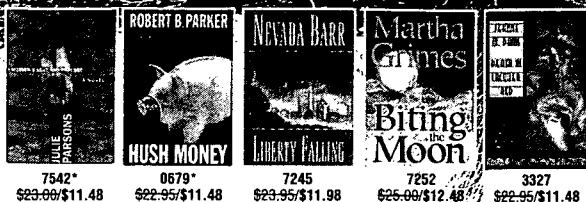
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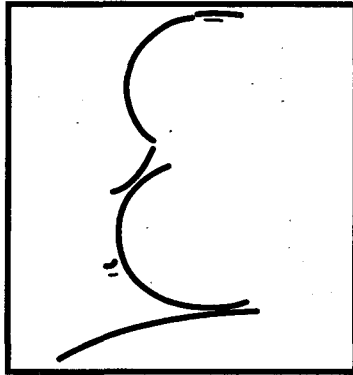


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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

April brings many things—showers, for instance, May flowers (*And what do May flowers bring? Ans.: Pilgrims*), and Edgar Week.

The last is a series of mystery-oriented festivities, panel discussions, book signings, and so forth, in New York, culminating in the annual dinner and awards ceremony hosted by the Mystery Writers of America wherein writers in this genre are honored. "Edgar" Week because the prize in each category is a porcelain bust of Edgar Allan Poe, without whom we would not be having this conversation.

Here are the 1998 nominees and winners in each category:

BEST NOVEL:

***Mr. White's Confession* by Robert Clark (Picador)**

***Blood Work* by Michael Connelly (Little, Brown)**

***Beyond Recall* by Robert Goddard (Henry Holt)**

***The Last Days of Il Duce* by Domenic Stansberry (Permanent Press)**

***A Likeness in Stone* by J. Wallis Martin (St. Martin's)**

BEST FIRST NOVEL BY AN AMERICAN AUTHOR:

***A Cold Day in Paradise* by Steve Hamilton (St. Martin's)**

***Reckless Homicide* by Ira Genberg (St. Martin's)**

***Numbered Account* by Christopher Reich (Delacorte)**

***Nice* by Jen Sacks (St. Martin's)**

***A Criminal Appeal* by D. R. Schanker (St. Martin's)**

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL:

***The Widower's Two-Step* by Rick Riordan (Bantam)**

***Atlanta Graves* by Ruth Birmingham (Berkley Prime Crime)**

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Butchers Hill by Laura Lippman (Avon)
Zen Attitude by Sujata Massey (Harper Paperbacks)
Murder Manual by Steven Womack (Ballantine)

BEST SHORT STORY:

"Poachers" by Tom Franklin
(The Texas Review, Fall/Winter 1998)

"Looking for David" by Lawrence Block
(EQMM, February 1998)

"The Halfway Woman" by Clark Howard
(EQMM, February 1998)

"For Jeff" by Perry Michael Smith
(EQMM, February 1998)

"Sacrifice" by L. L. Thrasher
(Murderous Intent, Summer/Fall 1998)

BEST YOUNG ADULT MYSTERY:

***The Killer's Cousin* by Nancy Werlin (Delacorte)**

Finn by Katharine Jay Bacon (Simon & Schuster)

The Maze by Will Hobbs (Morrow)

Paperquake by Kathryn Reiss (Harcourt Brace)

For Mike by Shelley Sykes (Delacorte)

BEST CHILDREN'S MYSTERY:

***Sammy Keyes and the Hotel Thief* by Wendelin Van Draanen (Knopf)**

The Kidnappers by Willo Davis Roberts (Atheneum)

Alice Rose & Sam by Kathryn Lasky (Hyperion)

The Wreckers by Iain Lawrence (Delacorte)

Holes by Louis Sachar (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)

BEST FACT CRIME:

***To the Last Breath* by Carlton Stowers (St. Martin's)**

Death Sentence by Jerry Bledsoe (Dutton)

Tough Jews by Rich Cohen (Simon & Schuster)

Greentown by Timothy Dumas (Arcade)

One of Ours by Richard A. Serrano (Norton)

BEST CRITICAL/BIOGRAPHICAL WORK:

***Mystery and Suspense Writers*, Robin W. Winks, Editor-in-Chief, and Maureen Corrigan, Associate Editor (Scribners)**

The Seven Deadly Sins in the Work of Dorothy Sayers by Janice Brown (Kent State University Press)

Cordially Yours, Brother Cadfael by Anne Kaler (Bowling Green University Press)

Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir by Eddie Muller (St. Martin's)

Midnight Dreary: The Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe by John Walsh (Rutgers University Press)

BEST MYSTERY PLAY:

***Voices in the Dark* by John Pielmeier**

BEST MYSTERY MOVIE:

***Out of Sight*, screenplay by Scott Frank (Universal)**

The Spanish Prisoner, screenplay by David Mamet (Sony)

A Simple Plan, screenplay by Scott B. Smith (Paramount)

BEST MYSTERY TELEVISION EPISODE:
"Bad Girl," written by Rene Balcer and Richard Sweren, *Law & Order* (NBC)

"Carrier," written by David Black, *Law & Order* (NBC)

"Fallen Idol," written by Gwyneth Hughes, *Silent Witness* (BBC/A&E coproduction)

"Skel in a Cell," written by Doug Palau and Nicholas Wotton; story by Steven Bochco, David Milch, William M. Finkelstein, and Bill Clark, *Brooklyn South* (CBS)

"Fools Russian," written by Scott A. William, Allen Edwards, and Matt Olmstead; story by Steven Bochco, David Milch, William M. Finkelstein, and Bill Clark, *Brooklyn South* (CBS)

BEST TELEVISION FEATURE/MINI-SERIES:

Exiled by Charles Kipps, *Law & Order* (NBC)

The Cater Street Hangman by T. R. Bowen (from a novel by Anne Perry) (A&E)

Child's Play by Michael Chaplin (based on the novel by Reginald Hill), *Dalziel & Pascoe* (A&E)

Death of a Hollow Man by Caroline Graham, *Midsomer Murders* (A&E)

Rear Window by Eric Overmyer and Larry Gross (based on a story by Cornell Woolrich) (ABC)

The Robert L. Fish Memorial Award for Best First Mystery Short Story went to "Clarity" by Bryn Bonner (*EQMM*, May 1998).

The Ellery Queen Award went to editor Sara Ann Freed. A special Raven was presented to Steven Bochco, and this year's Grand Master is P. D. James.

And now to new authors in this issue . . .

Mike Reiss, author of "Cro-Magnon, P.I.," says that "at age thirty-nine I got fed up with TV writing and decided to return to prose." Apparently the TV writing had been pretty good, though: he won three Emmys for writing and producing *The Simpsons* and three cable Ace awards as writer/producer of *It's Garry Shandling's Show*. He was also co-creator of *The Critic* ("winning zilch"). In his former life he was editor of the *Harvard Lampoon* and the *National Lampoon*; the latter published about eight of his short stories in the early eighties. This is his first mystery short story, however—and AHMM's first with a prehistoric setting.

Mr. Reiss and his wife live in Los Angeles; his hometown is Bristol, Connecticut.

S. L. Franklin, author of "Capriccio for Unaccompanied Violin," has written one prior mystery short story, "Rookies Know Everything," which was published in *Mystery Scene* (our Web site colleague, by the way) in December 1993. That story won first prize in a detective short-story contest. A former academic (very former, he says) now in the business world, Mr. Franklin and his wife live in Illinois.

The Taste of Black Lipstick

Sherrard Gray

Lieutenant Dean March stared at Lacy DeBeck lying facedown on the rug in his library, a red stain spreading out from his chest. A few feet from DeBeck was a leather armchair and a small table with a half-finished glass of whisky and a magazine, *Tennis*. A second armchair with its own table and glass stood opposite the first chair. Dean's chief, Bunk Cummins, was measuring the body's position with a tape.

Dean left the body and went to a tall woman standing by a set of french doors that led onto a balcony. She had introduced herself as Trish Hazelton, a name that rang a faint bell in the back of his head. White-haired and straight-backed, she stared bleakly across the lawn toward a red clay tennis court. "Poor Tiffany," she murmured.

"Tiffany?" said Dean.

"That's my granddaughter. She's supposed to meet me here any minute. She has Wednesdays off from her regular job at Brooks Drugs and was going to help me clean. When she sees this . . ." Mrs. Hazelton sighed. "Tiffany isn't much for violence. Well, who is?"

"Someone was," said Dean. "Was the house unlocked when you came to clean this morning?"

"Oh no. But I have a key. When Lacy didn't answer my ring, I let myself in. Came upstairs and—"

She stopped. "Why are you looking at me that way?"

"Sorry. I was thinking of something else."

Hazelton? Didn't a recent case involve that name? Something small but bizarre, even comical in a way, but he couldn't place it. He'd ask Bunk when he got the chance.

Moments later the medical examiner and two plainclothes from the state crime lab showed up. Sketches were made, photographs taken, and the body rolled over. The M.E. confirmed death by a single bullet to the chest, and estimated time of death between eight P.M. and midnight the previous evening.

"No powder burns," said the M.E., "so it wasn't point-blank. The perp was probably sitting in this other chair."

One of the lab technicians, a large man with bushy red hair, holding a magnifying glass, nodded. "Cosy scene, huh? The killer's sitting in this chair having a drink and a smoke with DeBeck, chatting, maybe laughing, all of a sudden pulls out a gun and pow! I'll tell you something else about the perp. He, she, was one careful dude. You can see where he wiped his prints off this glass and off the ashtray. We'll take it all to the lab, though—glass, ashtray, cigarette butt." With tweezers he picked up the lone butt, bent and long as if only one or two

puffs had been taken, and placed it in a cellophane evidence bag. "And this book of matches from the Blue Note in Manhattan—hey, I've been there, great jazz club—and the magazine." Bushy Head wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead and looked around. "Well well well." He walked to a wall mirror between two bookcases. Leaning against a shelf beside the mirror was a black tennis racket and two golf clubs. "The guy wasn't too vain, was he? A full-length mirror in his library?" He had started to reach for one of the clubs, a driver, when a female voice sounded on the stairs.

"Gran? Are you up there? What are those police cars doing—" A young woman in soiled bluejeans with a yellow bandana wrapped around her head stepped into the room. "Oh my God."

Dean thought he had seen her around town, but that wasn't why he was staring at her. He sensed Bunk watching him and looked away.

Mrs. Hazelton gave the newcomer a hug, patted her on the back, and turned toward Dean and Bunk. "This is my granddaughter, Tiffany."

Something clicked inside Dean's head. "Snoop Doggy Dogg," he said.

Everyone looked at him. The lab people and the M.E. exchanged glances.

"A CD, right?" said Dean.

The granddaughter narrowed her dark eyes at him while Trish Hazelton blushed and then laughed.

"You remember."

Tiffany might not have been much

for violence, but she and her grandmother seemed fascinated by the crime scene. Tiffany at least stood off to one side, but Mrs. Hazelton got in the thick of things, peering over the M.E.'s shoulder, even getting on her hands and knees to look for clues. At last Bushy Head said pointedly, "Excuse me, ma'am, but are you working for the Elizabethville PD?"

After the lab people had left, and while the M.E. was overseeing the removal of the body, Dean went over to Tiffany. "I'm sorry you had to see this."

"You're not as sorry as I am." They stood by the french doors, where she had gone to smoke. Next to the doors was a wet bar with a bottle of Wild Turkey on its counter. She put the ashes into her palm and then into her jeans pocket. "Messy habit, huh?"

Dean was taking in her dark eyes and high cheekbones, her curving neck. He remembered now that her grandmother's shoplifting case had been handled by another officer, T. J. Davison.

"I'm down to one pack a day," said Tiffany. "Gran's working hard on me to quit. On us to quit. She's down to something like ten butts a day." She lowered her voice. "You don't suspect her, do you?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Just wondered. Her swiping that CD from Ames. That was for me, you know. It was my birthday, and she didn't have any money and wanted to get me something."

Dean raised a hand. "Listen," he said, "I wasn't the one who pressed charges. It was the store owner, said

he wanted to make an example of your grandmother, and your grandmother agreed." It was coming back to him now.

"As I recall, the judge sentenced her to fifteen hours of community service, and she said, 'No, that's not enough. Give me at least twenty.' You know something?" Dean watched the granddaughter, late twenties, close to his twenty-eight, blow the smoke away from him. "I think your grandmother's a class act."

A smile edged across Tiffany's face. "Too bad you're a cop."

"Why's that?"

She used her hand again for an ashtray. "I dunno," she said, shrugging.

"So who've we got for suspects?" said Bunk. "Guess we'll have to start with the grandmother and granddaughter. They both knew DeBeck. And the girl at least smokes."

For some reason Dean didn't mention that granny also smoked. "Motive?"

They were standing on the gravel drive. The only other person around was T. J., who had showed up to watch the house, keep rubberneckers away. The press had come and gone, and Trish and Tiffany had also left.

Lacy DeBeck's three story mansion was probably the largest, fanciest house in Elizabethtown, a town of four thousand that had once been a major granite producer and was now creating milk, cheese, lumber, electronics, and contented retirees. Its wooded hills and green meadows provided the perfect set-

ting for retired bond traders and pediatricians.

DeBeck was neither a trader nor a doctor, but he had money and lots of it.

The house was flanked by wide lawns dotted with statuary and surrounded by woods. At the back a maple and beech wood rose to Shincracker Hill, which had been a favorite picnic spot of Elizabethtown until DeBeck, who had bought it ten years ago with the house, put up No Trespassing signs. The only visible evidence of any neighbors was a gray roof a quarter mile away seen through a gap in the foliage.

"Motive?" echoed Bunk. "Maybe he left them something in his will, and they didn't want to wait."

"I doubt that," said Dean as a green Caddy purred up the drive. "They just clean his house; they aren't related to him."

A broad-shouldered man with a headful of wavy gray hair climbed out of the Coupe de Ville. Dean recognized Rob Clampitt, a realtor with an office on Main Street. A year ago he had fined Clampitt ninety-eight dollars for failing to come to a complete stop at one of the town's two red lights.

"I just heard about Lacy over the radio," said Clampitt. "Tell me it isn't true."

"It's true, Rob," said Dean. "You live around here, don't you?"

"Yeah." Clampitt jerked a thumb toward the gray roof peeping through the trees. "What happened?"

"Looks like someone was having a drink with him in the library and

popped him," said Bunk. "Were you a friend of his?"

"Nobody was a friend of his. I got along with him okay, though. We played a lot of tennis together, an occasional game of golf." Clampitt stared up at the library windows on the second floor. "I'll miss him," he said simply and wandered off onto the lawn, putting his hand on a statue of Aphrodite.

"There's something else," said Bunk to Dean. "DeBeck had a weakness for younger women. Remember that tax accountant he supposedly fondled last fall? She withdrew her complaint, and I'll bet anything he paid her off. She was around twenty-five, same age as Tiffany."

"Come on. You saw the granddaughter. She wouldn't let an old jackass like him get near her."

"Thanks," said Bunk. The chief was fifty-two, same age as the deceased.

Clampitt, still looking dazed, had wandered back. "I heard that crack about Lacy. Don't kid yourself, Dean, he may have been in his fifties, but he was in great shape. Did you ever see him play tennis?"

The two cops shook their heads.

"He could beat most tennis players half his age."

"Who are his relatives?" asked Dean.

Rob Clampitt raised a forefinger. "Just one, far as I know. A brother, Marty DeBeck, lives in Dutton Falls. I feel sorry for the guy, having to deal with this."

"But look what he'll inherit."

An amused twinkle in Rob's eye. "You haven't heard Marty on the subject of inherited wealth, have

you? Don't get any ideas about Marty. He wouldn't hurt a flea." Rob's eyes slitted. "You want to know who did this? Either some guy who didn't like Lacy fooling around with his daughter or an old business partner."

"Business partner?" said Bunk. "I thought he didn't work. That he was independently wealthy."

Clampitt nodded. "He was. But years ago, when he was living in New Jersey, he tried his hand at business. A chain of convenience stores, I think. I understand there were some pretty shady personalities involved."

"Oh no," groaned Marty DeBeck, clapping a hand to his forehead and making a little circle around Dean. He had been cutting the shaggy lawn in front of his swaybacked farmhouse with a push mower. He staggered about for a while, then shook his fist at the sky. "Why is life so unfair?"

Dean had taken his hat off in the presence of such elemental grief. "Sounds like you were really close."

The brother stopped shaking his fist and looked at him. "Actually, I didn't like him." He groaned some more, kicked at a clump of mown grass, and took a second look at Dean. "Did you say he was shot? With a high-powered rifle?"

"No. With a pistol, from about ten feet away, we think. It looks like whoever killed him was having a drink with him in the library."

"Yeah?" said Marty with a skeptical frown. "That must have been one fast, depraved human being. My brother was quick as a cobra.

He was fifty-two but he could move like a twenty-year-old." More forehead claps and groans. He wore Bermuda shorts and a T-shirt over an ample belly that said DUTTON FALLS PLAYERS, and strands of stringy gray hair stuck out from under a wrinkled cloth hat. Dean thought he looked like a bum—but a colorful, intelligent bum. "Poor bastard never had a chance," said Marty.

"How do you mean?"

"Our old man made a pile in bathroom fixtures. Lacy inherited a couple mil and so never had to work. He dabbled in a few things, studied business in college—and flunked out—tried to run a bunch of convenience stores for a while, even thought of turning into a professional tennis player. But after each scheme petered out, he'd fall back on the old man's coin. Like a woodchuck running back to its hole."

"You didn't inherit?"

A faint smile that rapidly got larger appeared on Marty DeBeck's face. "I blew my inheritance on the horses. So now I gotta work. My wife too. I teach drama and poetry at U-37—took today off to try to catch up on all the work around here—and my wife's a claims adjustor for Nationwide. We're part of the hardworking middle class, right? We wake up in the morning bitching about rich folks like my brother who don't have to work, and we love it."

"Won't you inherit Lacy's estate?"

A dark look passed over the fleshy face. "Yes. And it scares the hell out of me. On the other hand, Lacy was a notorious cheapo. Thought ev-

eryone was after his money, so I wouldn't be surprised if he left it all to the Nature Conservancy or maybe an orphanage."

"You're hoping that he has?"

DeBeck didn't answer for so long that Dean wondered if he'd heard. Finally he said, "I honestly don't know."

The rest of Wednesday, Thursday, and most of Friday were taken up with another visit to the crime scene, which netted nothing substantially new, phone conversations with the crime lab and the medical examiner, a bomb scare at Kellogg Union High, court appearances for a previous aggravated assault and a DWI, two car accidents, a stolen canoe on Henderson Pond, and other daily happenings in the life of a rural cop. And the usual mountain of paperwork. The crime lab had advised that the bullet in Lacy DeBeck was a hollow-point .32 and that no usable prints had shown up on any of the evidence. Finally, at five o'clock Friday afternoon, Dean, who had agreed to put in extra hours until the case was solved, ate an early supper at the Wishbone Cafe and, with Miles Davis playing "Sketches of Spain" on the tape player, drove over to Trish Hazelton's.

It was still daylight when he pulled up outside the ranchhouse she shared with Tiffany on Cata-mount Road between a llama farm and a John Deere dealership. Smells of lilac and apple blossoms filled the air. A chicken coop stood next to a small, neat vegetable garden.

Stepping out of his squad car, Dean did a double-take. Mrs. Hazelton, wearing coveralls and a Blue Seal Feed cap, stood by the gate to the coop with a baseball bat in one hand. Three or four Rhode Island reds were scratching in the dirt, and soft cooing came from inside the coop where other hens were getting ready for bed. She smiled sheepishly as he came up.

"I didn't know you played baseball," he said.

"I don't. It's for getting eggs."

"Uh-huh," said Dean.

"It's our rooster, Captain Ahab. Tiffany named him from a book she read in school a few years ago. You go in there for the eggs and he's liable to end up on your chest."

That's when Dean saw it, standing in the doorway to the coop, sporting a bright red comb and yellow eye, a huge Plymouth Rock rooster. Captain Ahab wasn't smiling, either. "He sounds like a mean customer," said Dean.

"Heck, that's the way roosters are supposed to be. That's his job. Just like your job is to track down who killed Lacy."

"And to ask unpopular questions."

"Oh?"

"Don't get me wrong, Mrs. Hazelton—"

"Trish."

"—but I'd like to know where you and Tiffany were Tuesday night. The medical examiner says he was shot somewhere between eight and midnight."

"Tuesday night? That seems a long time ago."

"I know," said Dean looking down

at his shoes. "I should've gotten to this sooner."

"S'okay." She touched his sleeve and gave him a grandmotherly smile. "I know how busy you are. Tiffany and I were here, wallpapering her room." Trish Hazelton's eyes widened. "My God, you don't think one of us—"

"No, but I have to ask."

"This is all Tiffany needs. She's kind of fragile, you know. Doesn't look it but she is. Her father—" Trish bit her lip and for a second closed her eyes. "Don't get me started on him. He's in Alaska now, thank God, but when she was younger he abused her. Big time. And her mother—my daughter Claire—is an alcoholic, can barely take care of herself, much less any children. Tiffany's twenty-six and, sure, one day soon she'll move out. But in the meantime I guess you could say I'm both her mother and her grandmother."

Loud squawks issued from the chickens' enclosure where Captain Ahab was chasing one of the hens. "Oh, come on, Ahab," called Trish, "it's getting to be bedtime." She tapped the bat lightly against the chicken wire. "Did those guys from the crime lab find anything?"

Dean hesitated, then shook his head.

"I should have been a detective," said Trish. "I think what you do is so interesting. Beats vacuuming rugs and dusting bookshelves, that's for sure. You know what I think about the murderer? He wipes his prints off the glass, off that ashtray, doesn't leave anything lying around. A real careful

guy, looks like. But somewhere he screwed up. I'll bet anything."

"We should hire you."

The door to the ranchhouse opened, and Tiffany stepped out on the small porch. Gone were the bluejeans and soiled shirt, the bandana around her head. She wore pressed slacks and a raspberry-colored blouse, and her dark hair was piled on top in a thick swirl. Across her wide mouth, black lipstick.

Dean's mouth formed the word "wow," but no sound came out. There was a sound from Trish beside him, though: a low chuckle.

"Hello, lieutenant." Tiffany came down the steps twirling a small umbrella with a forefinger. "Any leads on who killed Lacy?"

"Not really."

"Someone didn't like him."

"Did you?"

Tiffany came so close to Dean that he could smell a lemony perfume. She looked at him for a long time without speaking. A sadness about her, but also a spunkiness. She didn't look like the type of person who wasted time dwelling on her hard background. "No," she said. "He was too cheap and he was mean."

"Mean?"

"If he had something he didn't want, he might let you have it. But if he thought you wanted it, no way. I found a lampshade in the trash once that was perfectly good, so I got it out to take home. He saw me leaving the house with the shade and decided he hadn't meant to throw it away after all."

"If you didn't like him, why'd you work for him?"

"I've wondered about that myself. Right, Gran? I mean there's plenty of work out there cleaning houses. I didn't care for him, but I loved his place. The three story house with the big library, the lawns and statues, the tennis court, and behind all that, Shincracker Hill. I used to take my lunch up to Shincracker, sit there on top of the world eating a sandwich. You can see into New York, New Hampshire, Canada from that hill. And Lacy owned it." Her eyes had taken on a dreamy look. "Sometimes I would pretend I owned his estate. Dream on, right?"

She was looking at Dean but not smiling. He had never seen eyes that dark or that luminous before. They seemed to go right through him, skewer him, and he coughed into his fist and looked away.

"Oops," she said, glancing at her watch. "Supposed to meet someone fifteen minutes ago. Have a nice evening." She started across the lawn toward the garage.

"You too," he called after her, and then blurted out, "On second thought . . ."

She turned, waiting.

Dean didn't know what had gotten into him. He knew he could be reckless—a year ago he'd been arrested by a statie for speeding—but something about this woman made him more than reckless. Made him foolhardy. "If you're going out with someone, I hope you have a lousy time."

Without any hesitation Tiffany laughed. "I don't know about a lousy time, but it will be less than exciting. George is nice but dull."

"Sorry to hear that," said Dean. He watched the Nova pull out and go down the dirt drive.

"Do you like baseball, Dean?"

"Huh?" He turned to the grandmother, who had a knowing twinkle in her eye. He decided he needed to be more professional and squared his shoulders. "Excuse me?"

"Baseball." Her steady blue eyes held his, and she raised the bat, took a short swing.

"Sure. I like baseball. Why?"

"Tiffany's playing at Simmons Field tomorrow in that women's softball league. I'm sure you've heard about it." Trish tapped the fat end of the bat into her other palm. "You want to see someone who can move? Stop by tomorrow at three."

"Mrs. Hazelton—Trish—I would love to, but I've got so much work to do I don't know where to start."

Saturday morning Bunk was leaning back in his swivel chair at the station, throwing darts at a blowup of Saddam Hussein pasted to a dartboard. "Why don't I get better at this?" he said as the dart stuck in the edge of the board. From the far corner of the room Sergeant Bannister, bent over a computer and going through his fourth cup of bad coffee that morning, called out for Bunk to hang in there.

"You'd just better hope Heather doesn't catch you doing this," Dean told him. Heather was the police department secretary, with an office in the next room.

"An odd thing," said Bunk, cocking his arm for another throw, "but I prefer darts to guns. I should've been born two thousand years ago

when the cops were still using spears. I'd have been a better shot then, too."

There was a loud thunk as the dart embedded itself in the walnut veneer.

The door to the squad room jerked open, and Heather's face appeared, flushed under neatly curled, blue-rinsed hair. "How old are you, Bunk?"

"That's an indelicate question."

Dean was trying to keep from laughing, but he also felt a wrench. He suspected that Heather, recently widowed, had more than a professional interest in Bunk, who also, five years ago, had lost his spouse. But Bunk, though he clearly liked and respected their secretary, wasn't responding. It was almost as if he liked being lonely.

The chief rose and headed for the dartboard. "I'll have to get a bigger board," he said.

Shaking her head, Heather went back into her office.

"Almost forgot." Bunk was back in his chair. "This stuff just came back from the lab." From a box on his desk he took out the whisky glass, the ashtray, *Tennis* magazine. "Charlie thinks the killer used a hankie to wipe his prints off the glass and ashtray. Oh, here's something you might be interested in. A little souvenir of the case." Bunk held up a matchbook with, on the cover, a trumpet amid floating notes and the words BLUE NOTE. "I saw another one of these in the library, so we know they belonged to Lacy, not the killer. Here, you're into jazz." He tossed the matches to Dean.

"Maybe a ghost shot him," said

Dean, turning the matchbook in his hand. He opened it, saw that only one match was missing, and shoved it into his pocket.

"We know one thing: this wasn't a crime of passion, it was planned."

"So who does that narrow it down to?"

Bunk had gone to the window, was looking at a light rain falling on Church Street. "This is enough to start *me* smoking again." He turned and faced his lieutenant, his lined face grim. "Heather got in touch with Lacy's lawyer; learned that his brother Marty is the main beneficiary, gets the house and close to two million. And get this. The rest goes to setting up tennis clinics in New Jersey for disadvantaged kids. Isn't that something? Nobody seems to like the guy, but there was something there. He had a dream, I guess." Bunk picked up a dart, set it down again. "So what about the brother? That house and two million bucks isn't exactly pocket change."

"He claims he's happy being poor. Doesn't want the money."

"Oh boy." Bunk sat on the sill, shaking his head. "You know what I like about you? You've been a cop for how long, three years now? You drive a souped up Trans Am, dig jazz, women aren't exactly repelled by you, and yet you're naive as the day is long. You actually believe a guy who says he doesn't want to inherit two million bucks?"

"Yeah."

"Good." Bunk pushed off from the sill. "Keep believing it because the world needs innocent people. But I can't. I'm trying, but I can't."

It was quiet in the squad room, just a faint clicking from Bannister's computer. Dean was tempted to put a hand on the shoulder of his chief but decided not to.

"What about Rob Clampitt?" said Bunk. "We didn't get much of a chance to talk to him. You want to check him out?" Bunk smiled. "You know him better than I do. Didn't you get him to make a little contribution to the town for running a red light?"

"Well, look who's here," said Rob Clampitt, getting up from his desk. "My favorite arresting officer." Clampitt was a large man with fading good looks, thick gray hair, bags under his eyes. But he looked alert and moved with a quick step. When Dean had pulled him over a year ago, Clampitt had grumbled and cursed but afterwards didn't seem to hold it against him. The realtor nodded toward a side chair and sat back down behind his desk. A lucite cube on the desk held photos of himself, a woman his age, and two twenties-something children standing outside an RV. On a shelf behind the desk were several tennis trophies.

"Did I ever tell you about that traffic fine, Dean? My lawyer wanted to fight it, can you believe that? The same guy who cost me an arm and a leg over a septic system suit two years ago. You know what I told him?"

"No idea."

"You're fired. That's what I told him. You know who does most of my law work now?"

Dean almost said "no idea" a second time; shook his head instead.

"Me." Clampitt jabbed a thumb into his chest. "I'm my own lawyer—except for closings and stuff like that. The hell with all of them, they're just in it for the money. Do you know what lawyers and sperm have in common?"

"No id—no, I don't."

"They both have a one-in-a-million chance of turning out human." Clampitt chortled.

"Look, Rob, I have to be somewhere else soon. I'd like to know if you heard anything Tuesday night?"

"Negative. We're about a quarter mile away, with woods between us. When did it happen?"

"Between eight P.M. and midnight."

"Am I a suspect?"

"Everyone's a suspect."

"Fair enough. Let's see, Olla and I were watching an old Fred Astaire movie. At least part of the time. She's gaga over Astaire, whereas I can take or leave all that twinkle-toe stuff. Probably from ten to eleven I was in my woodworking shop, and then it was lights out."

"Any ideas?"

Clampitt rose and went to the window, fiddled with the cord of a Venetian blind. It had stopped raining; sunlight glistened on the metal roof of the lumberyard next door. "Beats me. It's a funny thing, but I think I was one of the few people who got along with him. His own brother didn't like him, nor the people who worked for him. The cleaning lady and her granddaughter, the guy who mows his lawn. The townspeople." There was a catch in Clampitt's voice as he turned from the window. "For the past two hun-

dred years folks have been picnicking on Shincracker Hill, and then Lacy buys it and puts up No Trespassing signs. You've been up there, you know what it's like. You can see the Adirondacks and White Mountains from it. The guy could be a real horse's—" Clampitt caught himself, shook his head sadly. "I'll tell you a story you won't believe."

"Try me."

"Lacy and I had lunch together once in Montpelier—on him, believe it or not. We'd bet lunch over a set of tennis, and I won. He puts two quarters in the parking meter, we do lunch, get back in the car, and he doesn't start the engine. After a while I say, 'Everything okay?,' and he says, 'There's ten minutes left on the meter. Damned if I'm giving anyone a free park.'"

"Come on."

"I knew you wouldn't believe it. He could be like a little kid. You know, gimme that, it's mine. But he was also vulnerable. Once, after I beat him in tennis, I said, 'You'll get me next time,' and he said, 'I doubt it. Let's face it, I'm a loser. In everything I've tried. I'm an aging playboy—and not a very good one at that.'"

"But you liked him?"

Clampitt sat down slowly in his chair. "Some of the time. Especially when I was beating him in tennis."

"One last question and then I'll leave you alone. Do you smoke?"

"Nossir. I've got my bad habits, but smoking isn't one of them, thank God."

"A party?" said Dean into the phone.

"Well, not exactly a party. There won't be a band or any dancing," said Marty DeBeck. "But there will be a surprise or two. I hope you can make it."

"Listen," said Dean, "if you know who killed your brother, tell me now, okay?"

"This isn't about that," said Marty. "Tell you the truth, I'm not sure I want to know. I always figured that sooner or later some irate father or husband would take care of Lacy, and frankly, I can't say I feel sorry for him. So you'll be there tomorrow at four?"

Dean said he would think about it and hung up.

Trish saw him before he saw her. He was pulling into the parking lot at Simmons Field when, out of the corner of his eye, he picked up a long arm waving to him from the sidelines. The game was already under way, the Misfits against the Hooties. About seventy-five spectators were scattered along the sidelines. The grass was still damp from that morning's rain, but it was drying fast under a hot sun. To the west Mount Mansfield was shrouded in a blue haze. Trish came over to him by the first-base line.

"You made it," she said.

"Yeah, I happened to be driving by and . . . can't stay long, though."

Trish nodded, her expression serious.

"I know how busy you are. So. Any luck with the case?"

Dean looked into her eyes bright with curiosity and shrewdness.

"Not much. Do you have any idea who did it?"

"I might have. But I'm not talking until I'm sure."

"Who?"

Trish shook her head.

With a sigh Dean turned back to the game, watching Tiffany at short-stop for the Misfits, bent over, loose, pounding her left hand into her glove. "You still haven't found a print?" asked Trish.

"Nope. Wow!" A ball had been hit to the left side of the infield. At the crack of the bat Tiffany started running; she dived, made a one-handed stop, plucked the ball from her glove, and, still on her knees, threw to first. The runner was safe but only by half a step. "Did you see that?" said Dean. "Ozzie Smith couldn't do it better. Or Garciparra."

The blue eyes shone with pride. She gave him an appraising look. "You kinda like her, don't you?"

Dean, pretending he hadn't heard, kept watching the game.

"Okay, you don't like her."

"I didn't say that."

Trish smiled and then folded her arms and watched the pitcher. After a minute she said, "I guess it's pretty obvious how I feel about Tiffany. I told you about her father yesterday. He's a long way off now, but the scars are still there. Do you know what the worst thing about that is?"

"No."

"It's made her jumpy around men. Way down deep she isn't sure she trusts them. So she goes for the safe ones, like George, the guy's she seeing now. To get George to do anything you have to light a firecracker under his fanny. You know why I'm telling you this?"

"No."

"It's because—darn it, here I go."

Two fat tears raced each other down her cheeks. "If Tiff sees me . . ." She turned away from the game and faced the parking lot, and beyond the cars a blue-green hayfield waving in the breeze. "I want her to get past those scars. I want her to be with some guy who's both gentle and a little crazy. You know what I mean? A guy you don't have to light a cracker under." She swiped a sleeve over her eyes and turned back to the game. "Sorry about that. Do you play baseball, too?"

Dean didn't answer. Though it was a warm day, he felt a chill in his back. There was a question he knew he had to ask. "Did DeBeck ever try anything with Tiffany?"

"Lacy?" Trish gave a scornful laugh. "You better believe he did. But I set him straight."

"How?"

"Told him if he made another pass at her he'd be playing tennis in a wheelchair."

"What did he say?"

The grandmother rested a finger lightly on Dean's chest. "He didn't say a word."

Sunday afternoon Dean walked into the squad room and found Bunk throwing darts. He had hung an old quilt behind the board to muffle any stray shots. "Chief, you know what day it is?" Dean slumped into his chair, draped a leg over the corner of his desk.

"Don't worry, I'm not charging the town for this. Kind of sad, isn't it? Like I have nowhere else to go."

Bunk picked up another dart,

cocked his arm. "You know what we're missing in this case?" he said as he planted a dart in Saddam's left ear. "Hey, I'm getting better. A piece of hard evidence. A fingerprint, a hair, or—if we get really lucky—the .32 auto he was shot with. Dean? Hey, Dean?"

"Huh?"

Bunk had come over and was waving a hand in front of his face. "You aren't listening, buddy. Come on back to earth."

"Sorry." Dean dropped his foot off the desk and sat up. "I was wondering what black lipstick tastes like."

"Black lipstick?" Bunk Cummins squinted hard at his young officer. "Are you okay? You need some time off?"

"No, no, I'm fine. Just rambling there. I see what you're saying about hard evidence." He took the Blue Note matchbook out of his pocket and tossed it in the air. "This is about all we've got. And it's not gonna help us." Idly he opened the flap, stared at the matches.

"What's wrong?"

"One match gone. Left side. Nah, that doesn't mean anything. This case has me thinking in circles."

"What doesn't mean anything?" The chief sounded a little impatient.

"Okay, I'm right-handed. If I were to take a match from here, I'd take it from the right side. Nine out of ten times. Maybe ninety-nine out of a hundred times. So does that mean the killer's a—" Dean suddenly stopped, feeling that chill again.

"Goddammit, Dean, what's up?"

That was maybe the third time in three years he had heard the

chief swear. "Nothing," he said. "Just babbling." He pictured Tiffany making that great play at shortstop and throwing the ball to first. Nothing unusual about that—except it was with her left hand. He looked at his watch and stood. "Gotta go to the brother's little party I was telling you about. You coming?"

Bunk looked over at the stack of paperwork on his desk. "Probably not."

When Dean pulled into the gravel turnaround at Lacy DeBeck's estate, Marty DeBeck was standing in the portico in white ducks and a Hawaiian shirt with his arms spread wide like a revivalist preacher. A few people Dean had never seen before strolled about the grounds, taking in the statuary and tennis court. Off to one side, by the statue of Aphrodite, he saw Trish and Tiffany. On the porch with Marty was a man in a seersucker suit.

"Glad you could make it, lieutenant," said DeBeck. "Look at this place, will you. This million-dollar house, the tennis court and lawns, four hundred acres of prime real estate. It's all mine. And do you know what I say?"

Dean said he didn't.

"Nuts. That's what I say. Nuts. I don't want it. You saw what it did to my brother. By the way, this is John Rawlins, my brother's attorney, who has agreed to be here to make this somewhat official. And all these beautiful creatures you see lounging about are members of the Dutton Falls Players. Are you on duty, sir?"

"Yup," said Dean.

"Then you can't drink, can you? Pity. Well, go on up to the library and get yourself a Coke. I'll be right along, but first I have to make a phone call. An important guest is still missing."

In the library everything looked the same as before—except Lacy DeBeck wasn't lying facedown on the rug, and the bloodstain had been removed, leaving a faintly lighter area. On the wet bar in the corner were bottles of whisky, white wine, sodas, an ice bucket. A Mr. Coffee machine burped next to the ice.

The two armchairs and their little tables still faced each other. Dean wondered what Lacy and his killer, sitting in those two chairs and sipping Wild Turkey, had talked about? Had it been Marty sitting in this other chair? Was his talk about the evils of inherited wealth a smokescreen? Was he really bitter that he had squandered his inheritance and Lacy had kept his?

He heard footsteps behind him and turned. Tiffany stepped into the room, wearing blue slacks and an off-white blouse, her hair mounded on top, her wide mouth dark with black lipstick. "That brother," she said. "Do you think he's all there?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"I don't know. But he called me yesterday and went on about how loyal Gran and I were, how we stuck by his brother even though he was 'difficult,' and then he insisted we come here this afternoon. Said we wouldn't regret it. You don't think he's weird? And what are all these actors doing here? I don't get it."

"I think he wants to announce something," said Dean, forcing his

eyes from her dark mouth, "and he has to have an audience."

"Hope I'm not interrupting anything." Marty DeBeck flowed into the room, one arm extended in the gesture of a Roman senator, and got a cold glance from Dean. On his heels were Trish, the lawyer, and six or seven players. "We're not quite all here," said Marty, pouring himself a drink. "Oh lordy, this is going to be fun."

"Fun?" said Tiffany.

Marty looked at her and raised an appreciative eyebrow. "God, what a great Ophelia you'd make. Or Desdemona. Wouldn't you like to join our acting company?"

"Probably not," said Tiffany.

"A shame." Marty stepped over to the french doors. "Great view of Shincracker Hill. You ever been up there, lieutenant?"

They heard the kitchen door in back open and close, and the host raised a finger. "Our last guest has arrived. Can you imagine a house on top of Shincracker? Views of the Green Mountains, the White Mountains, Canada."

Rob Clampitt walked into the room. He saw Dean and stiffened.

"Glad you could make it, Rob," said Marty. "Pour yourself a drink."

Tiffany started to move past them onto the balcony. "Where to, young lady?" said Marty.

Blushing a little, Tiffany said, "To the balcony for a smoke."

"The balcony? Nonsense. This is my house now, and you may smoke wherever and whenever you want."

"Thank you, sir."

With a sinking heart Dean watched her dig a lighter out of her

pants pocket and light her cigarette. Told himself he was being crazy; the fact that she smoked and was left-handed didn't mean a thing.

Marty DeBeck clapped his hands. "All right, let's get this show on the road. You're probably wondering why I've brought you all together. The reason is, I'm a hopeless show-off."

"That's why we love you," cried one of the actors.

Marty bowed. "Thanks, Loïc. Many of you have heard me express misgivings about wealth. About having all this." While Marty waved his arm grandly, Tiffany stubbed out her cigarette after only two puffs and went over and stood beside Dean. "Well," said Marty, pausing dramatically, "I'm keeping it."

Cheers from the players.

"Sort of keeping it anyway." A hush fell on the room. "I'm turning the house and fifty acres over to the Dutton Falls Players for a new playhouse."

For twenty seconds no one spoke, and then, in tears, one of the actresses ran to Marty and hugged him. Others followed. When the commotion had finally subsided, Marty went on. "I'm also giving ten thousand dollars apiece to two people who, like myself, maybe didn't love my brother but who nevertheless worked faithfully for him all these years." He smiled at Trish and Tiffany, whose mouths had fallen open. "And finally, you, Rob."

Clampitt stared at him.

"I'm not going to give you anything. Not outright anyway. But I

will sell you something, at a very reasonable price, that you've wanted for a long time. Something my brother refused to sell." A wry smile. "Probably because he knew how much you wanted it." Knowing murmurs and sad chuckles from the group. Marty threw wide his arms and said, "Shincracker Hill."

Rob Clampitt's eyes were moist as he walked over and hugged Marty. When the applause died, Marty shouted, "Does anyone feel like a glass of champagne?"

The answer was a resounding yes.

Champagne corks bounced off the ceiling, glasses were clinked. After a while the actors excused themselves to look over the house and grounds. Dean was watching Rob raise his glass, with his left hand, for another sip. Rob saw him watching and with a slight frown moved away.

It was quiet in the library; Marty somber. "Poor Lacy," he said. "He did have talent, but he could never harness it." He walked over to a bookcase and patted a tennis trophy in the form of a player on a pedestal. "This was about the only thing he did well. There weren't many his age who could beat him. In fact, around here, Rob, you were the only one."

"Heck," said Rob modestly.

"My brother always said you had the smoothest backhand he'd ever seen. Why don't you show us your backhand, Rob."

Reddening and grinning at the same time, Clampitt waved him away. "Seriously. Use that new racket." Marty pointed to the black

racket, a Wilson Sledge Hammer, leaning against the wall by the full-length mirror.

Suddenly, next to Dean, there was an exclamation. "That's it!"

Looking both puzzled and curious Marty asked in a quiet voice, "What's it, Trish?"

"Lacy's new racket. He bought it the day he died and never had a chance to use it. I'll bet a year's earnings that if it was Mr. Clampitt who came over that evening, Lacy had him pick up the racket, try it out."

Marty looked totally confused. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Dean saw Rob edge toward the door.

"Prints," said Trish excitedly. "That's what we've been missing. His prints will be on the han—"

Her words were lost in the shuffle. Rob wasn't edging any longer toward the door, he was sprinting, but he wasn't fast enough for the Misfits' shortstop. Like a gazelle, she went to her left, dived, hitting him at the knees with her shoulder. The two sprawled on the rug in a tangled heap over which Dean stood with his gun out.

"Okay, Rob," he said. "Up." He tossed the cuffs to Tiffany, who caught them in one hand and slipped them around Clampitt's wrists.

Marty's face was white. "You killed him," he said to Rob.

A mad gleam, a crazed smile. "Yes, and it worked! I pleaded with him to sell me Shin—"

"You don't have to talk till you get a lawyer," said Dean.

"A lawyer?" Clampitt laughed scornfully. "I'd be better off hiring Donald Duck." He turned toward the french doors and in a quiet voice said, "Shincracker. I loved that hill. Three-hundred-sixty-degree views, enough land for an eighteen hole golf course. A thirty room inn. Trails for hiking and cross-country skiing. People would've come from all over New England." He gave a choked groan. "My life's dream shot to hell. Oh well, maybe I'll get a light sentence." He turned to Marty. "Let's face it, no one liked your brother. Look what my act got you and the Dutton Falls Players. By killing him, I performed a community service."

Marty stared at him, unable to speak.

A forlorn laugh from Clampitt. "Lighten up, man. You look like Hamlet's ghost."

"Rob was pretty shrewd," said Bunk, pulling a dart out of the quilt. "Forcing himself to have a cigarette with Lacy so we'd think the killer was a smoker. Wiping off his prints. He must have gone to some trouble to wipe off his shoes, too, after walking through the woods to Lacy's house, because we didn't find any trace of dirt or old leaves. But he goofed on that racket." Bunk took aim with another dart.

"Did he ever," said Dean. "Charlie laughed when I asked him check

it. Said Rob forgetting to wipe his prints off the handle probably wouldn't make any difference, that the chances of his leaving a usable print on it were one in a thousand, and he was right."

"What do you know, I got Sad-dam's mustache this time." Bunk picked up another dart. "That Trish Hazelton is something else, isn't she?"

"Maybe we should hire her."

"The granddaughter's something else, too."

"Yeah." Dean tried to keep from laughing as Bunk cocked his arm for another throw. He could see the chief was dying to ask about his date last night.

"What's so funny?" said Bunk.

"Nothing." Another long silence. Finally Dean said, "Aren't you going to ask me how it went last night?"

"Last night?" Bunk appeared confused, but Dean didn't think he was. "Oh, last night. That's right, you had a date with the granddaughter. How'd it go?"

A slow grin spread across Dean's face. "I found out what black lipstick tastes like."

Bunk looked genuinely puzzled this time. He put down the dart and peered at his young lieutenant. "Are you okay? Listen, this has been a tough week. Long hours, lots of stress. Maybe you should take a couple days off."

Missing Persons

Jas. R. Petrin

Returning from lunch with his meal repeating under his ribs, Chief Robideau was in no mood to display charm at finding Mrs. Robideau and a woman who looked like a small, anxious poodle waiting for him in his office. He mumbled a greeting, sat down, and rummaged in a desk drawer for an antacid pill. Mrs. Robideau jumped to her feet and fastened a scathing look on him.

"Where have you been?" Then, preferring her own response, she added, "I *know* where. Out wasting time while criminals go skulking around. Sometimes I wonder why we pay our taxes!"

"One reason *we* pay our taxes," the chief gently reminded her, "is so that I can continue to draw my salary." He swallowed one of the tablets dry, peering blearily around for something to wash it down with.

"This," declared Mrs. Robideau, indicating the small woman as if introducing a royal personage, "is Betty-Anne Bretton, and she has a crime to report. Hear that? A *crime!* Go on, Bets, tell him. If he tries to bully you, I'm right here."

The little woman continued to stare fixedly at the chief as if concerned that he might jump up at any moment and make a rush at her. She had a tiny voice.

"It's—it's something that I heard in the disposal chute."

"In the what?" The chief's rumble pressed the little woman back an inch.

"In the garbage chute," interjected Mrs. Robideau, "aren't you listening? Are you going to interrupt, or are you going to let her have her say?"

The chief rumbled again but said nothing. The woman explained, "I live in the Highcliff Apartments. I wasn't actually *in* the disposal chute, of course, I was standing in front of it, holding the flap open, ready to drop my kitchen Tidy Bag in. That's when I heard it."

"Heard what?"

"Heard the murderer. I'll remember his words for the rest of my life. They made my blood run cold! He said, 'If you play games with me, I'll fix you good.' That's what I heard. Those very words."

The chief closed his eyes. "And you think that was a murder threat?"

"Well, the voice said—"

"'I'll fix you.' That could mean a number of things."

Betty-Anne closed her mouth with an audible click and turned in desperation to Mrs. Robideau, who placed a supportive hand on her shoulder. "Dear," she advised, "be patient. The official mind is slow on the take sometimes, and things aren't helped by the fact that my husband has obviously eaten some-

thing disagreeable for lunch instead of the nice sandwich I made him. It's in his desk drawer. I looked. He'll throw it away later. He thinks food grows on trees."

"It does," the chief reminded her. "And I'd have eaten that sandwich except that I was at the Sunrise Diner earlier, quoting our new by-laws to Rani Probal, the owner, and he practically shoved his chili burger special down my throat."

Mrs. Robideau observed him as if from a distance.

"Yes, I can see how that might happen. He tied you to a chair with aprons and force-fed you with a pair of tongs. Now he'll vanish from your inspection list." She raised an eyebrow. "It's strange how that happens. Like some kind of an X-File."

The chief wisely abandoned the argument. "What about those details? If somebody's making threats, I'll look into it."

"Looking is one thing," said Mrs. Robideau airily. "Doing something is quite another. But there's detail if you want it. We believe the threat was carried out, don't we, dear?"

Betty-Anne nodded. "Well, I—I mean—yes!"

"Then let's have it," Robideau said. He wasn't convinced. End of Main was small, the budget was small. Even when he had staff to assist him (a condition that came and went with each balance sheet), the chief dealt with every report personally, and in his experience most complaints derived from misunderstandings that could be put right with a phone call. But he tried to sound less grumpy. "Take your time."

"Go ahead, dear," said Mrs. Robideau encouragingly.

"Well, this all started a few weeks ago, on a Wednesday. I know it was Wednesday because we'd just had our card party—not a *party* party, but a get-together in the hospitality room for a few hands of whatever interests us—rummy, euchre, frustration . . ."

"Yes, yes, go on." The woman dragged on like a magistrate.

"It was my job to tidy up afterwards. It's a room we share, you see, and—"

"Right, yes."

"—so it's important to keep it tidy. Anyway, I finished up, locked the door, and went down to the end of the hall to drop the trash down the garbage chute."

Hmm, garbage chute. The chief pulled his new list of potential by-law infractions out of his top drawer and, yes, there it was, amendment 23: sec. B, para. 4: *Trash disposal chutes prohibited . . .* No new construction; existing installations to be sealed up in favor of recycling bins and the town's normal refuse collection. As the chair of the Green Committee had argued, one couldn't have people anonymously popping unsorted rubbish down a chute into an incinerator, plastics and God-only-knew-what-else spewing toxic fumes into the air. The chief saw the problem, but he did have other concerns—like the graffiti that seemed to be spreading like a blight throughout the town.

"The chute door is set in the wall. Heavy iron, a flap that lifts up. As soon as I raised it, I heard that voice." Mrs. Bretton shuddered. "It

was so cruel and cutting. I could easily imagine that threat being carried out."

I'm sure you could, the chief thought. "Did you recognize the voice?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't hear clearly."

"Do you know where it came from?"

"It's a chute. It serves every floor. I don't know what else it connects to. You could ask the janitor."

"And who's that?"

"Leonard Boski."

The chief winced. He knew Leonard. He was doubtful that Leonard could tell him anything besides the exact operating hours of every pub in a ten mile radius.

"Okay, so you heard this threat, but you also claim that the actual crime was committed."

"Oh yes." She was gaining confidence. She sat on the edge of her chair, erect, as if to convince him by her physical bearing.

"You see, Miss Lemay has disappeared."

"Who?" The chief scowled.

"Angela Lemay. A dancer who lived in our block. No one knew her well. She took the top corner suite only a week after old Mr. Jarvis left. But we tried to make her feel welcome—we all did. And now—"

"You say she was a dancer?"

"That's right. Oh, not one of *those* kind. A *real* dancer. Ballet. A very cultured girl from the city who was going to open a dance school right here in town. Mr. Overberg—our landlord—says she was lucky to come along just when an empty suite was available."

The chief cleared his throat. "So you want me to find this woman?"

Mrs. Bretton looked baffled.

"Well, certainly. We're very afraid for her."

"But you don't know that the threat you overheard was directed at her—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake," interjected Mrs. Robideau, "she's missing, isn't she?"

"We can *assume* she's missing, but there are less fanciful explanations. She could have gone on a holiday, be visiting friends, or—"

"Or she could be the victim of a horrendous outrage," pronounced Mrs. Robideau, leaving no doubt that she had put up with all the procrastination she was going to. "For crying in the sink, aren't you paying attention? A woman is threatened, then—poof!—disappears! If that doesn't concern you, then no woman's safe. Not even me. *Especially* not me!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that with a husband as dense as you looking out for me, I might as well give myself up to the nearest murderer right this minute. Hang out a sign. 'Easy pickings. Husband dumb as a post.' " She steered Betty-Anne to the door by the arm. "Don't strain yourself over those new bylaws!"

"You did what?"

Mrs. Remillard stopped dealing the cards and stared openmouthed at Betty-Anne Bretton, who had a new confidence, bearding Robideau the way she had. "I went to see Chief Robideau, and told him about Miss Lemay." She added quickly,

defensively, "Just like I said I would!"

"We *know* what you said, dear, but—"

"Let's not argue," broke in Mrs. Pashniak worriedly, "I'm anxious to hear what the chief is going to do about the matter."

"He's looking into it."

"Looking into it?" This was Mrs. Hundt, the remaining member of the foursome. "Then he'd better wear his bifocals. When it comes to crime, Chief Robideau couldn't see a cow on a dining room table unless it was well-done with mashed potatoes on the side." She let out something between a snigger and a snort. "And just when does this amazing event come about? Probably not until the men in white coats arrive to—"

A beep from the intercom silenced her. They sat there wide-eyed a moment, then Betty-Anne got up and pressed the button.

"Who—who is it?"

The voice was official-sounding. "It's Chief Robideau, Mrs. Bretton. I'd like to talk with you, if I may."

Close up, he seemed very large. One didn't notice that so much in the queue at the grocery store, or in the Legion on a Saturday night. But he seemed pleased at finding them all together and wasted no time asking whether they were all of one opinion about the new tenant, top floor, corner suite.

"She's missing, all right," confirmed Mrs. Hundt. "I took her some cheese pirogies—I give everybody cheese pirogies—but I didn't get no answer even after I knocked at her door for fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes?" The chief raised his eyebrows.

"Well, it seemed like fifteen minutes, though maybe it wasn't quite that long. Anyways, no answer, so I went back and put the pirogies in the fridge. Someone'll eat them. They're the best ones going."

"*Mine* are darn good," asserted Mrs. Remillard with a snippy lift of her chin.

"Your cabbage rolls are, dear, but—"

"Yes, yes," Chief Robideau said. "What else can you tell me? Who saw the young lady last?"

"That was me," admitted Mrs. Remillard. "I'd just got home from the bakery, set my bags down to fish out my key, and I hear this sniffing. I look, and there's Miss Lemay sitting in the stairwell, head down, crying her eyes out. She scurried off without one word. I never did know what she was weeping about."

"You'd weep," Mrs. Hundt reminded her, "if *you* were about to be killed!"

"Only if I seen it coming."

A chill silence descended as the ramifications of that thought gripped them.

"This happened . . ." Robideau urged Mrs. Remillard.

"Two and a half, three weeks ago. On a Monday—that's when I shop. Must of been—let's see—the twenty-eighth of last month."

"And you live . . ."

"Top floor, same as she does—*did*."

The chief frowned. "I'm trying to picture it. There must be a fire door on your stairwell—there's a bylaw

about that—so how could you see her? And with the steps leading down, her face would be turned away . . .”

“Nope, there’s one more flight. There’s a storage room up there where they keep old furniture, things like that. And the fire door don’t close properly.”

Another infraction. The chief made a mental note. “Anything else?” Robideau turned to the uncommunicative Mrs. Pashniak. “What about you? You’re awful quiet.”

Mrs. Pashniak flushed red. “I—I don’t know anything. Except that she’s a nice, quiet girl.”

“Well behaved, was she?”

“Quiet as a clam,” confirmed Mrs. Remillard. “All the racket in this place comes from the super and his friends. Inner-moanious bunch.”

“Excuse me?”

“She means inharmonious,” said Mrs. Hundt, who did crosswords; she added, “Or something.” Then with concern: “Are you going to get to the bottom of this, Chief Robideau?”

The chief’s reply was a noncommittal frown.

“Look,” Leonard Boski argued, fingers spread in the air as if to fend off blame, “I don’t know nothing about bylaws. If you say the chute’s illegal, I’ll believe it. I just work here. Don’t shoot the piano player.”

The chief stood by patiently as Boski went on clinking with deliberation through a gigantic ring of keys. “Funny, this is a different lock from the others. But I got something

that’ll open it, something I keep for emergencies.”

The chief noted the new lock on the door of the apartment, brass-colored and shiny, unlike the dull gray locks on the other doors along the hall. “It’s not standard practice here then, I take it, to change locks when the suite changes hands?”

Leonard shrugged. “Couldn’t say. I ain’t been here a month. I only took the job ‘cause my pogie ran out.” To the chief’s dismay he lost his place in the ring and started over again. “I doubt it, though. Normally you just re-key ‘em.” Finally he displayed a small instrument that looked like a short, bent pick. “Here’s the puppy.” He fitted it, jiggled it, and amazingly the door opened. He seemed suddenly troubled. “You don’t suppose she’s lying in here dead of a heart attack, do you?”

Robideau nudged him aside.

The suite was disordered. Rumpled clothes, scattered magazines, soiled dishes. A lot of plants. Despite the untidiness, the furniture appeared new and expensive, a colossal TV ogling blankly at them from one corner, faced by a sofa and armchair in white leather. The air smelled faintly skunky.

Boski wrinkled his nose. “Pooh. I hope that ain’t her!”

Robideau moved slowly about the room, glancing left and right, and stopped at the kitchen, a small ell off the main room. Cold pots on a stove. Congealed fat in a pan. A smell of bacon. He moved on to the bedroom and found the same innocuous disorder: an open closet, more scattered clothes, an unmade

bed—the biggest he'd ever seen in his life. Boski brightened, realizing there was no decomposing body to deal with. "The bed's been slept in. That's a good thing, right?"

"Not especially. We don't know *when* it was slept in."

Robideau noted with misgiving that the clock on the bedside table was exactly one hour slow.

The small bathroom yielded no insights, except that it was spotlessly clean and tidy compared with the rest of the suite.

Nowhere was there a picture of the girl herself, which was disappointing; it was always nice to know what somebody looked like when you were searching for them.

"All right," said the chief. "That'll do." He hadn't learned much, certainly nothing from which to draw inferences as to the tenant's whereabouts, but he was here investigating a suspicious circumstance, a woman's disappearance, and after ascertaining that she was not in the suite, possibly sick or in trouble, he could not intrude further. He paused by a dieffenbachia plant, poked into its depths, and gently extracted a small plastic gnome pinioned to the soil on a long peg. He examined it, then replaced it.

"What next?" asked Leonard.

"The mailbox."

Entering the lobby, where mail slots lined the wall in three flat, brass-faced tiers, Leonard Boski suddenly advanced a complaint of his own. "Chief," he grouched, "when are you goin' to stop the little beggars in this town from scribbling gerfeedy over hell's half-acre? They done a number on the back of this

place, and the owner's all over me about it. 'Clean it off,' he says, but he don't say how." In a narrow room behind the mailboxes, he opened a steel panel that exposed the backs of one whole tier. The slot labeled 623 was empty except for a standard record club offer. "Those came this morning," he commented. "I got one, too."

Robideau glanced at the envelope with little interest. "About ~~that~~ lock," he said, disarmingly returning to the earlier discussion, "if you didn't install it, who did? The previous caretaker?"

"I doubt it. Not Dal Reeves. Only thing Dal could install was his butt into a chair. And anyways, he'd been gone three, four months already before I arrived, and she got here after that. She must of done it herself."

"Why would she if the management would re-key it?"

"Maybe she didn't know any better. Or maybe the management wouldn't help her. Ask the owner when you spring it on him about the illegal garbage chute." He chuckled. "He's gonna *love* that. Anyways, the girl's bed was slept in, and you can see she's been clearing her mail, so she must be coming around here sometimes, right?"

Robideau handed back the envelope without comment. As he moved to the door, Leonard called after him, "So what are you goin' to do about them gerfeedy criminals, huh?"

The chief sat in his car thinking. He agreed with the cantankerous Boski that, at least superficially,

things appeared normal. The apartment was messy but not alarmingly so. Nothing overturned or broken, no sign of foul play. But certain things were troubling. The clock showing winter time when it ought to have been rolled forward to daylight-saving ten days ago. The girl was last seen on the twenty-ninth—almost a week before the clocks changed. And then there were the plants. Mrs. Robideau kept plants and wouldn't dream of neglecting them. If she went away, she left explicit instructions as to their care—water twice a week and a careful dusting of the leaves—and woe to the chief if he forgot.

Miss Lemay liked plants, too. Dressing them up with little ornaments like that gnome. If she had been missing since before the clocks changed, her plants ought to be pretty dry. But the soil that little gnome was sitting on was as moist as a West Coast rain forest.

Somebody was watering those plants.

Roald Overberg, owner of the Highcliff Apartments, was a tall, observant septuagenarian erect as an obelisk behind the calf-lined blotter of his teakwood desk. He gazed back at Robideau with eyes like two bright blue crystals. His skin was tanned, the legacy of a winter vacation. He wore a gray silk tie, a cashmere sweater, and showed half an inch of starched white shirtcuff at both wrists.

"The letters went out two months ago," Robideau told him. "You must have got one. Besides, the new by-laws are the talk of the town."

Overberg shrugged, displaying a patronizing smile. "I generally disregard the 'talk of the town,' chief. To a man of my years it hardly seems relevant. And as to the letter, well, no doubt it's misfiled. I'm not as organized as I once was."

The chief replied with a doubtful glance. The room was tidy to the point of fastidiousness, even the objects on the desk appearing to have been positioned with a special template. He said:

"There's one other matter . . ."

"Oh?" Overberg's trim gray eyebrows moved.

"It seems as though one of your tenants is missing."

"Really? How strange. I've never misplaced one before."

Robideau gave him a caustic look. "Don't you want to know who I'm referring to?"

"Oh yes. Of course."

"I mean Miss Angela Lemay. She's not been seen for weeks. You weren't aware of it?"

Overberg's teeth were startlingly white in that tan face.

"Chief Robideau. Really. People lead their own lives. It's not my province to meditate on their whereabouts. But since you drive me to it, my guess would be that she's on a vacation."

"That's my guess, too, but I need to nail down some dates. Can you show me her last rental payment? She doesn't use postdated checks, I hope."

"As a matter of fact, she pays cash."

"Then you'll have a receipt stub."

Overberg studied him. Still smiling, he made a circular motion with

his hand. "Again, it will be here somewhere. I need time to locate it, that's all."

"Fine. I'll call back. One last thing. The lock's been changed on her apartment. When was that done?"

"I have no idea."

"Not changed by you at her request?"

Did his smile twitch slightly?
"No, sir, it wasn't."

"Doesn't it bother you, people changing locks like that? I'd imagine you'd want access in some situations."

"Good Lord, chief, *I* don't have access personally. I leave that to my superintendent. I have enough keys to lug around." He flourished a key fob, which Robideau's sharp eyes noticed held only four keys and a small metal charm.

"It seems odd," Robideau said, "that she'd replace a lock at her own expense when she could have had you re-key the old one."

"When you find her you'll have to ask her about that, won't you?"

Robideau held the steely blue gaze a moment, then got up.

"I hope," he said from the door, "you'll act promptly on those bylaw infractions. The fire door. And that garbage chute . . ."

Missing person reports were not common in End of Main, and so Chief Robideau was surprised to receive a second one the very next day. Even more interesting was the name and address of the complainant, Mrs. Tozer. She lived one street over from the Highcliff—in fact, just across the alley from it. She could not locate her son, a man of

about forty who was no stranger to Chief Robideau's files. Edward Tozer (Ted, his mom called him) had been accused of unsavory acts in the past, several times being a suspect in the mutilation of neighborhood pets.

Mrs. Tozer was as he remembered her, a heavy woman with an aura of doom about her. She had no idea where poor Teddy could be.

Robideau asked, "Was there an argument between the two of you? Was he threatening to go off on his own?"

"His clothes are still in his closet, aren't they? And his money—all what he had—is still in the tin box under his bed. He wouldn't leave that. Not on purpose."

"All right, Mrs. Tozer, let's visit his room."

She led him up a malodorous staircase, wheezing asthmatically like someone unaccustomed to the climb. Probably, Robideau thought, she hadn't been up these stairs in years.

There was scarcely space for the two of them in the half-story room. It had walls of half-height that angled up to a low, narrow ceiling. The bed was a tangle of sheets. The walls were covered with posters, and realizing the violent nature of some of them, Robideau's jaw tightened. Not typical movie horror scenes, this was neo-Nazi stuff, hateful and vicious. Sensing his disapproval, Mrs. Tozer was defensive. "I know what you're thinking, but it's just something he's going through."

Good Lord. And the man was forty.

A sheet of drawing paper lay on

a rickety sideboard, covered with writing that was heavily stylistic. Fat, pillowy, indecipherable characters. The markings repeated as if whoever made them had been practicing penmanship.

"Has Ted taken up calligraphy?"

"I dunno. What's that?"

"Fancy writing."

"Oh, he can write okay. He's not stupid, you know."

Back they went down the creaking stairs. At the door, the woman told Robideau emotionlessly, "I hope you find him soon. It's important."

Robideau paused. "How so?"

"He's got a job. He was looking for ages, since you told him that's what he should do, but no luck. Then a man offered him work. A man he met someplace." She swung her head morosely. "He's already done a few things for him."

"What sort of work is it?"

"Ted never told me."

"Did you meet his employer?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know anything about him? Anything at all?"

She screwed up her heavy face in concentration. "Well, sir, one thing. Ted said he wore an overcoat that could of paid off our mortgage."

This time the tanned face appeared strained. In a slow, practiced movement, Overberg cupped the back of his head with linked fingers and leaned back, as though to communicate a relaxed sincerity.

"I know of Ted Tozer. Who doesn't in this town? But he doesn't work for me, and even if he did, I trust that wouldn't be a crime un-

der some new bylaw." He went on gratuitously. "We may have been seen together. We talked at the mall one day. A chance encounter."

"Oh? Did he mention during that conversation that he was thinking about moving out of his mother's house?"

"Why, I believe he did. Called her an old bag. Said he was fed up with her. I chastised him, of course. 'She's your mother,' I told him."

"That cheered him up, I'm sure."

"Ah . . . not exactly. But I did give him food for thought."

"Do you know where he might have gone?"

"He mentioned something about Texas, I think."

Robideau contemplated the aging but still handsome face. He considered Tozer's sudden departure, abandoned belongings, and forgotten cash. "Mr. Overberg, let me tell you my problem. I don't often have missing persons to find, but here I have two of them. And you're connected to both."

Overberg chafed his thin, clean hands. "Hardly connected. I have many tenants, after all. And surely I'm not the only person to have spoken to Mr. Tozer in the last while."

"Still, it's strange."

"It isn't really. A small coincidence. One of life's little pranks."

He laughed dryly.

You'd better hope, the chief thought, that the joke's not on you.

"What it is," Leonard Boski indignantly informed his visitors, Wilmer Gates and Chuck Lang, with insistence, "kids nowadays got

no respect. It's like they figure they got clearance from God almighty to go slap gerfeedy all over the place. And I'm supposed to get it off? How? You answer me that!"

His pals sat on crates in the furnace room with their beers in their hands, staring thoughtfully into space as if they expected the solution to leap into their minds, filling a blank spot. And Lord knew they had blank spots. Big enough to roll a combine-harvester through. But for some reason Leonard put up with them; maybe because they put up with him.

"We didn't do gerfeedy when I was a kid," Leonard announced, defying anyone to refute it.

"What *did* you do?" Chuck asked. He burped hugely and fisted his chest.

"When I was a kid," Leonard said wistfully, "we'd sit around someplace and make rockets and stuff."

Rockets? Both Wilmer and Chuck came to attention.

"*You* made rockets?" Incredulity flickered across Chuck's simple face. "I never figured you for no rocket scientist."

"What's that s'posed to mean?"

"Well, you never been the sharpest tack on the chair, after all. And you made rockets?"

"We didn't invent 'em, you mutt, we just made 'em. A cardboard tube. Saltpeter, sulfur, and charcoal shook in a jelly can with some marbles till our arms practically fell off, making fuel fine as baby powder. We launched her from a hunk of rain trough stuck in a picket fence. That sucker'd climb two hunnerd feet in four seconds."

"You could of blown something off," said Chuck. He winked at Wilmer. "Maybe he did."

"Dangerous materials are no problem when you know what's what."

"Hoo," said Chuck. "Hoo, haw! I feel safer already, don't you, Wilmer?"

"Hoo, haw!" Wilmer said.

There was a far-off hollow clang, a growing, humming sound, then a sudden slam followed by a *whump!* as something shot into the heart of the furnace.

"That'll be Mrs. Remillard tossin' her cat poopies out," Leonard muttered. He stood up and wandered over to a cluttered workbench overhung by shelving that groaned under containers of miscellaneous paints and chemicals. "Now, let's see what we got to clean that gerfeedy off with . . ."

"I thought Robideau told you to seal up that chute," Chuck said.

"He did. See the owner, I told him. What do I look like, I said. Some real estate baron?"

"You look," opined Wilmer Gates, "like a gas fitter."

"Thanks." Leonard held out a can at arm's length to read the fine print, then gave it up. "Anyways, the chief's busy looking for one of the tenants that's disappeared." He recounted the chief's visit. "I think those old ladies got too much time on their hands. Maybe *they* should clean off the gerfeedy."

Someone coughed gently, and their heads swiveled toward the door, where an impassive, no-nonsense face was glowering in.

"Leonard, can I see you a moment?" the chief said.

Boski straightened. "Okay. But I ain't received no instructions yet, what to do about the garbage chute."

Out in the hallway the chief told Boski, "If I said that someone claims they heard voices in that chute, what would you say?"

"Depends who heard 'em, chief." Smirking. "You?"

"Just answer the question."

The janitor clawed at his grizzled chin. "Well, you could hear voices coming from any floor where there's an access door standing open. But people usually drop their rubbish in, then beat it. The doors are heavy. They close on their own."

"I know," the chief replied, "I tried one."

Leonard continued, "But there is another type of door on the chute, the kind that stays open on a latch. One here in the furnace room, another one upstairs."

"Upstairs?"

"Way upstairs. On the roof, practically. In a storage room there."

The chief nodded. "What do they keep there?"

"Not much, really. Lot of old stoves and fridges that crapped out. Some raggedy old carpet. A bunch of plumbing stuff."

"I'd like to see in that room."

"You would?" Boski got a clever look. "Okay, I'll give you the grand tour. But on one condition. That you come out back with me after and see a real crime scene. The criminal gerfeedy vandalism plastered on the back of this building."

The chief agreed.

But the storage room was a dis-

appointment. It was a wide, bright area, windows on three sides, one large room. Nothing much in it but disused appliances and other odds and sods, as Boski had said. But there was indeed a chute access door that could be latched in an open position. The conversation that had so upset Betty-Anne Bretton could have taken place here.

"Is this room kept locked?"

"Pretty much."

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"You can take it as a yes."

"Thank you. We can look at that graffiti now, if you insist."

The back of the building was a mess, all right. Someone had done a real number on it. Spray-painted markings galloped across an area some twenty feet wide.

"So?" growled Leonard, "don't this break a bylaw?" He flung out a hand at the swirls and loops. "My boss is somethin' hot about it. Never seen him so riled. Either the gerfeedy goes, he says, or I do."

The chief backed away, studying the markings. They were highly stylized, almost Cyrillic, composed of fat puffy characters. Only with intense scrutiny could he flesh out any actual characters. One grouping looked as if it might be the word "secretary."

"What's it mean?" he asked.

"You tell me, chief."

Then something clicked. The chief realized he'd seen markings like this before but on a smaller scale. It was much like the writing he'd seen in Ted Tozer's room.

"How long has this been here?"

"About two weeks."

Robideau let out an uneasy

breath. The timing could be coincidental, but that required a faith in coincidence far beyond anything Robideau could summon.

"Listen," he said, "I don't want you to clean this off."

"Huh? The boss said—"

"Never mind what he said. Play around with it, find a solvent that works on it, but don't actually erase the words till I say you can. Got that?"

Seeking a few peaceful moments in which to compose his thoughts, Robideau stopped at a sleepy coffeshop, the paper from Ted's room, compliments of Mrs. Tozer, tucked into his pocket. It was too dark now to inspect the graffiti; he would do so first thing in the morning. For now he would content himself with mulling things over.

Poking around the girl's suite, inspecting her meager mail, interviewing her neighbors, the chief had learned nothing conclusive. The ladies had been helpful to a point, and forthcoming—with the possible exception of Mrs. Pashniak. She almost seemed frightened, as if she knew more than she was telling.

On the other hand, she might simply be afraid for the missing girl.

As for the disappearance of a man who may have defaced the rear of the Highcliff apartments, was it coincidence? Not likely. With a connection running from Tozer to Overberg; and from Overberg to Angela Lemay, one couldn't dismiss the matter so easily. Besides, Tozer was a middle-aged man. Why on earth would he be scrawling graffiti?

He drank some coffee.

But if Ted *were* the graffiti bandit, was he caught by Angela Lemay scribbling on the rear of the building? Had she admonished him, and had all that bottled up hate and spite come boiling out, driving him to attack her, and—perhaps unintentionally—knock her head too hard against the wall? Panicking, had he hidden the body in the dumpster and run off?

But why wait so long? He'd hung about another two weeks or more, and in that time would surely have calmed down long enough to pack a suitcase.

And then there was Overberg, who, like Mrs. Pashniak, seemed to know more than he was admitting to.

But none of this explained the voices in the chute, or Miss Lemay's distress on the staircase as dutifully reported by Mrs. Remillard.

Start over.

Suppose Tozer had attacked Lemay and was seen by someone. This "someone" later emerged with a blackmail threat, prompting Tozer to flee . . .

But you don't blackmail a penniless loser.

Robideau ordered a sour-milk doughnut. He lacked information. He didn't know precisely when Lemay had come to harm, or even if she had come to harm. The plants were being seen to, the mail was being collected, but the clock showed the wrong time. Of course, resetting the clock would be a priority only to somebody actually living there. And Overberg had yet to produce that canceled check . . .

Overberg.

These were murky waters, but every time Robideau stirred them, the old businessman bobbed up like a cork.

So turn it around. Say Overberg was the instrument of Miss Lemay's disappearance and Tozer the witness. It hung together better. Tozer's bedroom overlooked the rear of the Highcliff, so conceivably he might have witnessed something. And if that incident were compromising to Overberg?

Tozer attempts blackmail. A reasonable assumption—the man being a cheat and a crook. Overberg doesn't respond. Tozer applies pressure with some fake graffiti, emulating the stuff appearing all over town. (If only Robideau knew what that damned scrawling meant!) But despite Tozer's efforts, Overberg identifies his tormentor, perhaps by determining which house and window have a view of the crime scene. Exposed, Tozer takes off running.

The argument was rickety, in need of a crutch, but it could stand. There were missing elements, such as the nature of the relationship between Overberg and Lemay. The chief didn't know yet that there *had* been a relationship.

But Robideau smiled inwardly. He was starting to get somewhere.

The following day, Tozer's hieroglyphs in hand, Robideau drove to the Highcliff. He walked up the alley to the back of the building, where some boys were amusing themselves by bouncing a hockey puck off the side of the garbage dumpster.

He quickly settled one thing. The

two sets of markings were a match, with identical if indecipherable words appearing both on the wall and on the sheet of paper. They were the product of the same hand. Apparently, as he had surmised, Boski's "gerfeedy kid" was none other than Ted Tozer, a middle-aged man. Robideau struggled with it. *Secretary*. An unlikely word. Might this actually be "secret," with a flowery embellishment tagged on?

On impulse he called to the boys. One of them ambled over, cautious but inquisitive. "We're not hurting anything," he said defensively.

"I can see that. But I've got a question—if you can answer it."

"My mom told me not to talk to strangers," the boy said deadpan, eliciting a burst of hilarity from his pals.

"That's good advice. I doubt if you can explain it anyway."

"Explain what?" The boy shuffled closer.

"Well, I'm wondering why this graffiti is so hard to decipher. I mean, if someone wants to say something, why not make sure people can read it?"

"People *can* read it," said the boy. "Some people."

"People like you?"

"Sure. It's like you don't want just anybody reading your mail, right?"

"You can't read this, though."

"Sure I can." The boy looked at the wall. "It says, 'Secrets don't keep. Pay me.'"

Robideau reappraised the fat, pillowy characters, and immediately the phrase jumped out at him. The boy was right! *Secrets Don't Keep. Pay Me!*

"I don't suppose you know who wrote this," he said hopefully.

"Nope, I don't. But they weren't really serious."

"How do you know?"

"'Cause they didn't sign it. See, a guy's serious, he initials his work."

Robideau looked at markings on the dumpster. Sure enough, every effort was initialed, like a work of art.

"Thanks," said Robideau.

"No problem." The boy slouched away, slapping the ground with his stick.

Now, said Robideau, pleased with himself, onward and upward! He would take on Mrs. Pashniak. Get something out of her if he had to give her the third degree.

Mrs. Pashniak received him sheepishly, as if she had been waiting for him to call and confront her. But she had enough spunk to put him on the defensive. "Have you found her, Chief Robideau?"

"No, not yet, but . . ."

"Did you figure out where the voice was coming from?"

Robideau informed her it might have come from the furnace room or from the upstairs storage room, but he was forced to admit he had not gone further along that line of investigation.

"Then you should, chief. You should. After all, it's where all this started."

"I don't disagree. But there's some unfinished business between you and me, isn't there?"

The sheepish look returned.

"This changes things," she said as if to herself.

"Changes what, Mrs. Pashniak?"

"I lay awake all night fretting about it. I made a promise, and I don't take my promises lightly. But as I said, things have changed."

"Do you know where Miss Lemay is?"

She shook her head. "No. I wish I could tell you that, but I can't."

"Then . . ."

She silenced him with a raised hand, opened a drawer in the coffee table, extracted two keys and a small plastic bag, and thrust them at him. "Miss Lemay meant to go away, you see, and asked me to keep an eye on things. Take in her mail, water her plants until she sent for them—she loved plants. But she made me agree not to tell anyone. She never said as much but I got the feeling she'd be in awful trouble with somebody if they knew she was sneaking away secretly like that."

"But if you knew she was leaving, why did you worry?"

"I didn't. It was the other girls who worried. I thought I knew what was going on, but then . . ." She took a deep, shuddering breath. "Then I started thinking, what if something happened to her *before* she got away? What *then*? So I decided to tell you."

Robideau nodded. "This at least explains why the plants weren't dried out." He took the mail and leafed through it. It didn't amount to much, but then the girl hadn't been here long enough to establish a presence. There were a few fliers, a cable television bill, and a manila envelope from a national seed company . . .

His interest quickened.

The manila envelope had been redirected, a previous address scribbled out with a pen.

A previous address.

An address in the city.

"I won't be arrested over this, will I?" fretted Mrs. Pashniak.

"Not today," Robideau assured her.

The girl who received him was thin and plain, though with remarkable eyes and a faultless complexion. Her name was Sidney Brixton, and certainly she knew Angela. They had been friends since enrolling in Fine Arts, where Sidney had majored in photography, and Angela in modern dance. Angela had done well. Won some awards for choreography. But she'd had trouble landing employment after graduation.

Sidney Brixton was consternated to hear that her friend had gone missing. The chief said, "You haven't heard from her, then, since she left?"

"No, sir."

"You're not just saying that because she asked you to?"

"Oh, no!"

"You were close, then? Friends and roommates?"

"Yes. Then she went off to that little town. I told her it was silly, that the city was a better place for her, but she was determined. She had a benefactor, she said. A *patron*. Someone who would help her get established." Sidney ruefully blinked her large, sad eyes. "She hoped to open a dance school. It was her fallback plan, you see—to teach. But it would take money to set it up, and she didn't have any."

"Who was this benefactor?"

"A man. I never actually met him. If he came to get her, they'd meet down at the door. We spoke on the phone a few times, and I didn't like him because he seemed arrogant. Smug and superior. I never said as much to Angela, though."

"Why not?"

"She would have had ten fits. She'd have asked me how I could say such a thing about someone I knew nothing about."

Sidney shrugged. "We parted on good terms, though, and I expected to hear from her." Her face clouded. "And now I think you're telling me that I may not hear from her ever again." Her large eyes glistened.

"I need to find this man," Robideau said. "Can you tell me his name?"

"Only a pet name. Angela called him Obie."

Obie, thought Robideau. Overberg?

"He approached her after a school performance. I didn't go that night. The subject matter didn't appeal to me." She frowned disparagingly. "All about forced prostitution during wartime—the brothel camps armies set up. It was a short musical sketch that Angela had choreographed. But I don't like that stuff. Angela told me later about this older fellow who approached her afterward."

"This Obie."

"Yes."

"So he liked her work . . . You had your doubts, though, about that?"

"Darn right I did. I thought he was using her."

I think so, too, the chief thought.

"Do you have a picture of your friend?"

"Of course. I'm a photographer."

Thank God, Robideau thought.

It was a posed photo in black and white. Sidney explained that there was a whole new movement afoot in black and white photography; she seemed excited by it. What a difference, Robideau thought, between her and the so-called artists who aimed spray cans at fences and walls.

The girl in the picture was dark and pretty. Strong features, hair curling in at her chin. She sat elbows up, fingers interlaced, her face against the back of one hand.

"That's a curious bracelet she's wearing," Robideau said.

"Yes, isn't it. It's only pewter, but rather interesting. All those little figures, like charms, sort of, engaged in different forms of dance. She found it in a pawnshop and had to have it. She wore it always."

Overberg, thought Chief Robideau darkly, heading north out of the city with the wheel clenched in his two big fists. It was Overberg who had befriended Angela. Older, smug, condescending Obie. The smiling man with no answers. Well, he was going to have to come clean before this day was out!

With a sense of forboding he thought about Angela Lemay. He was ready to accept—like Sidney, like the girl's neighbors, like Mrs. Robideau—that something terrible might well have happened to her. Mr. Overberg had a lot to answer for.

But unfortunately Mr. Overberg

was not at home. More accurately, he did not acknowledge his doorbell, nor did he answer his phone. Robideau swallowed his irritation and drove to the Highcliff.

If he couldn't deal with Overberg directly, he would take Mrs. Pashniak's advice and go back to the beginning, that voice in the garbage chute. He could probably rule out the furnace room, Leonard Boski's domain, and go directly back to the storage room at the top of the stairs.

He buzzed Leonard from the door, but it was Chuck Lang who let him in. "Leonard's a tad busy at the moment, chief. He thought up a surefire concoction to get the paint off them bricks." Chuck winked. "The man's a rocket scientist, you know." The chief wasn't interested. He relieved Chuck of Boski's key ring, then took a ride to the top floor.

Again he was struck by the room's clinical tidiness. He entered reluctantly, concerned lest he disturb some crucial if microscopic evidence.

The room's contents were in three rough groupings: furniture on the left, unused building materials and fixtures in a small corner on the right, and appliances at the back standing three deep along the wall. There were some large washers and dryers, no doubt originally from the building's laundry facility; also some old electric ranges, fridges, and freezers.

And the chute access door.

It was quiet up here. Except . . .

Yes. Very odd. The machines should be disconnected and dead,

but one of them was humming, quietly functioning. Why? Moving to investigate, he found that the sound was coming from one of the freezers.

An unpleasant queasiness stirred inside him. Steeling himself, he heaved up on the lid.

It was locked.

Well, if Boski could jimmy apartment doors, Robideau could certainly open a recalcitrant freezer. He found the pick on Boski's large key ring and applied it to the key slot. The pick wouldn't fit. But the chief was bound and determined to open this freezer and picked up a length of flat iron from the plumbing corner. He wedged it under the lid, heaved again. With a screech, the catch tore out of the sheet metal.

He threw back the lid.

He had been prepared to discover a human body. What he saw was a long, bent, bundled object, lying hunched in the bottom of the box. It was wrapped in an old window curtain taken from a stack by the door, drapery cords binding it tight. He leaned into the frosty cavity, fumbled with the bindings, pulled them open . . .

A human hand slipped out, each tiny hair on the back of it sparkling with tiny ice crystals.

"Found what you're looking for, chief?"

Horried and startled, Chief Robideau straightened. He turned and found Overberg standing behind him, eyes fixed in an intense, icy hatred.

"It appears," the older man continued, glancing at the freezer, "that you've been prying into things—

pardon the pun. I trust you have the appropriate permissions. A warrant would be nice." He had lost his youthful radiance, the haughty humor missing from his eyes.

"I think we're past those niceties now," the chief told him, regaining his composure. "I'm going to guess that it's Ted Tozer lying in this freezer, and that you can tell me how he got here."

Overberg hunched his shoulders like some creature in the wild sizing up its predicament. Fight or flight. With the back of one foot, he slowly closed the door.

"You spoke to Ted's mother. I watched you from this room. Frowzy old mop. Would you believe she's a decade younger than me?" Behind dusty glass the treetops moved in the cool spring sunshine. "And her son was a piece of work. I peered into him and found a rather twisted soul under that nasty exterior."

"A twisted soul that you took advantage of."

"He needed money. I had a job for him."

"You had a job for him, all right," the chief remarked, "but not the type of job he could speak openly to his mother about."

"We came to an agreement—"

"About disposing of Angela Lemay," the chief put in mercilessly.

Overberg bristled. "No. That shouldn't have happened! The man was a fool! I wanted him to scare her, make her realize that she needed a protector. But he got carried away. I was devastated." Overberg sniffed. "Naturally I told him he would have to get rid of the evi-

dence, that it was his problem. Only later did I discover what the maniac had done."

Overberg's cold blue eyes turned to the chute.

"My God!" Robideau breathed. He understood now the clinical tidiness of the bathroom in the suite one floor below, and the unnatural cleanliness here in this room. Someone had scoured them. Scrubbed them clean. Tozer must have done his grisly work in her apartment, then slipped up here to use the disposal chute. How many trips had he made? What had he been thinking about?

Overberg was talking again.

"Afterwards he wanted more money, much more. I think his mind had begun to come apart. He had some mad idea that I was fabulously wealthy, that because I owned this modest apartment block I could dash off checks for spectacular sums. I couldn't pay anything close to what he was demanding."

The chief was finding it difficult to take his eyes off the chute. "So you paid him nothing. And to hit back at you, and perhaps change your mind about it, he scrawled that warning on the back of your building."

"Yes. And I was worried, at first, I'll admit it. But he wanted those scrawls to look like real graffiti, wanted me to believe some third person knew of our secret—and he outdid himself. When I saw how incomprehensible the markings were, I relaxed a little. Anyway, I knew it was him. It was sneaky. The sort of thing he would do." Overberg pushed his hands deep in his

pockets. "He was an odious man who deserved what he got."

"So what happened then? I suppose you got him up here to renegotiate, then knocked him on the head with a hunk of that old plumbing. Maybe even this bar." He looked at the bar in his hand with new appreciation.

The grin returned for a moment, a brief flicker. "He attacked me. It was self-defense."

"No. He wouldn't do that. He wanted money from you." The chief nudged the freezer. "I'd say getting him into this thing was the hard part, but I'm sure you're fit enough to manage it." Robideau shook his head. "Why were you so bitter towards Angela?"

For a moment the man seemed uncertain, his confidence gone. He said, as if explaining it to himself, "I suppose I was flattered. A woman her age taking an interest in a man of my years. Oh, I'm well preserved, as they say, but still I was aware of the gulf between us. A regular chasm. And when she seemed ready to overlook it—yes, I was flattered."

"But you misled her. You had no intention of funding her school."

"Well, I don't know. Perhaps if she had shown me a positive business case . . ."

"You wanted to possess her. Control her. So you got her out of the city, put her up in an apartment, made all sorts of promises to her. But the bottom line was that she was to become your property. You expected thanks of the most physical kind, and when it wasn't forthcoming, you lost your temper with

her. That's why she wouldn't let you in the apartment, why you had to meet with her in this room. That's why she changed the lock on her door."

Something angry and evil flickered in the old man's eyes. "She was using me. Leading me on!"

"And so her fate was sealed."

"All of our fates are sealed, Chief Robideau—yours included."

Overberg brought his hand out of his pocket then, and there was a pistol in his grip. A very tiny pistol—tiny and deadly. He twitched the thin barrel.

"Get into that freezer."

Robideau didn't move. His grip tightened on the bar.

Six floors below, Leonard Boski was in a foul mood. He had tried every solvent available to him, finally being reduced to employing raw gasoline. But his exertions only served to smudge the stubborn ink even more deeply into the porous brick. He returned angrily to the furnace room and banged the gasoline can down on the bench.

"You mean you're not a chemical whiz after all?" Chuck Lang asked with a sly contempt. "You, a rocket scientist?"

Leonard was fuming. "Shut up!"

"Oh, I'll shut up. Whatever you say, professor."

It was too much for Leonard. He had scoured rough red brick till his arms ached, his hands were bleached from all the chemical indignities they'd undergone, and now he was expected to endure this verbal abuse on top of it all? It was too much. He flung the furnace door

open and began firing cans and bottles into the flames. "Hey, buddy, hold it!" Chuck Lang bellowed. But it was too late. He saw the gasoline container go into the box, then Leonard kicked the door shut with his big black boot.

There was a sound in the belly of the firebox like a huge piece of ordinance going off. The furnace pipes jumped, the walls shook, and dust rained down in a noxious snowfall on their baseball caps.

"Jeez!" said Chuck, an I-told-you-so look on his face mixed with raw terror, "you ain't no explosives expert neither!"

Robideau heard a sharp *bang* and the door of the chute burst open, striking Overberg under the shoulder blades, driving him forward on a blast of expanding gasses and black soot straight into the chief's arms. The chief dropped the bar, snatched the gun away, spun Overberg around, and hustled him out of the room.

"So you never did find that poor girl—I knew you wouldn't."

Robideau glanced up from his paperwork, miffed.

"I found out what happened to her. Doesn't that count?"

Mrs. Robideau gave a grudging sigh.

"Oh, I imagine it does. In a way. But what I had in mind, you'd bring the girl back, all smiling."

"She won't be smiling, ever again. Teddy Tozer saw to that. But then Teddy won't be smiling either, compliments of Roald Overberg, so there's some justice to it, I suppose."

"And you figure Overberg will get ten years? If that's justice, you can keep it!"

"Well, he didn't kill the girl—not directly. And a jury may buy his self-defense argument after they hear about Tozer's history and view what we pulled out of the furnace grate."

"That pewter bracelet."

The chief nodded. He added, uncomfortably, "And . . . a few other things."

"He should get life!"

"He will. He's in his seventies."

Mrs. Robideau was not mollified. "They could stick a few more years on him if they tried. What about those bylaws he broke? They should be good for an extra six months. I mean, what's the good of *having* by-

laws if you're only going to use them against ordinary citizens?"

"I don't make the laws, I only enforce them." Robideau set down his pen. "At the risk of quoting Leonard Boski, I just work here."

"Is that what you call it?"

He looked at her. "You do tease me unmercifully, don't you?"

"Never. Now, come on home and get some sleep. No telling what tomorrow will bring."

They put out the lights and went out of the building together. As they disappeared around the corner, arm in arm, Mrs. Robideau's voice came floating back, saying, "When we get home, I'll make you a nice lunch for tomorrow. You might want something to throw out later in the day . . ."

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The Horse with White Stockings

Anne Weston

The day got off to a bad start when Efraín spilled the tin cup of salt into the cookfire.

He could have salvaged most of the salt from among the coals if he hadn't snatched at the falling cup, trying to save it, and knocked the pot of water into the fire, too.

That put the salt beyond rescue and also extinguished the fire.

"You shouldn't have left the salt there," he snapped at Sulema.

She didn't reply, just picked up some kindling and built a small fire to one side of the wet area. She refilled the water pot from the big bucket and set it on the new fire.

Efraín ate his saltless beans and rice in silence, then stood up. "I guess now I have to go to the store for salt," he muttered.

Sulema glanced up. "The water's boiling," she said. "There'll be coffee in a moment."

"I can't wait. I don't want to waste any more of the day." He started down the trail.

"Yes, you'd better hurry in case there's a big run on salt this morning," Sulema called after him.

The aroma of fresh coffee followed Efraín along the rain forest path. He could picture Sulema sitting on the log he'd cut into a chair, sipping her coffee in peace and playing with the baby. The farther he walked, the more he wished he'd stayed a few minutes longer and not been so short-tempered.

The reason he was angry had nothing to do with spilled salt, of course. Their cow was dying, and he couldn't bear to tell Sulema.

Efraín had taken the older cow over to their new neighbors a few days before. The neighbor, Soto, planned to raise cattle on the farm he was cutting out of the rain forest. He was expecting a fine bull to be delivered from the big Ramos ranch on the other side of town. Efraín had arranged with Soto to leave the cow at Soto's place to be bred when the bull arrived.

He and Sulema had talked a lot about all the things they could buy when the cow had her calf and the calf got big enough to sell. Efraín had said that besides being able to buy plenty of seed and pay off their bill at the local store, they could buy cloth at the big store in town for Sulema to make herself a new dress, and what color did she want? She'd talked all through dinner about the merits of yellow (cheerful in the rainy season) or blue (wouldn't show stains) or maybe a print with flow-

ers. Efraín didn't see much difference between them, he thought they'd all look nice, but he liked watching her eyes flash with excitement. They both knew they'd probably end up keeping the calf, to make their herd bigger, but it was fun to dream.

Then late yesterday Soto had ridden over on his horse and said that Efraín's cow was dying.

Efraín had hurried on foot to Soto's farm. He hadn't told Sulema what was wrong. The cow lay wheezing on her side. Her eyes seemed ready to burst out of her head. Saliva pooled around her mouth.

"She's been like this since yesterday," Soto said.

Efraín checked her all over but couldn't find a bite or injury. He looked in her mouth, thinking that if she'd eaten a poisonous plant her tongue might be swollen, but it wasn't.

"I never saw a sickness like this," Soto had said.

Neither had Efraín. He rushed to the house of his other neighbor Catalino, but Catalino wasn't there to advise him. Efraín waited till nearly dark and then went home.

So this morning Efraín planned to describe the ailment to the storekeeper and see if he knew what it was. The accident with the salt made an excuse for going to the store without having to tell Sulema about the cow.

Halfway to the store Efraín remembered that he had been the one to set the salt on the rock of the fire ring while he filled his plate with rice and beans.

When he sighted the store, Efraín realized that his day was not going to get any smoother. Four horses were tied under the cashew tree beside the small wooden building. A knot of men stood nearby. Efraín recognized most of them as neighbors. The storekeeper's daughters, wide-eyed and solemn, leaned out the store window, listening to the men.

If it had been a Sunday, he would have assumed the girls were trying to overhear a bit of especially scandalous gossip. But on a weekday there shouldn't be such a crowd. Something bad had happened.

"Did you hear the news?" asked old Adolfo, a distant neighbor.

"Nooo . . ." Efraín tried to think of the last time he'd heard anything that could be called news.

"About that rich cattleman."

"The one who brought my new bull yesterday," said a man that Efraín couldn't place for a moment. Then he realized it was his new neighbor Soto. What was different about him? One of Soto's teenage sons was there, too.

"What about him?" Efraín asked.

"Dead!" Adolfo burst out.

"Dead? How?"

"Beaten to death! Last night, on the road near the cantina, on the way to town. And all the money Soto gave him for the bull is gone."

"That bull is mine now," Soto said. "Fernando Ramos sold it to me, and I paid him for it. I've got witnesses—all my sons. He was a fool to go and get drunk in the cantina with so much money in his pocket."

Soto's bluntness brought a pause to the conversation.

"Well, it's true that if he was going to drink, he shouldn't have told everyone in the cantina how much money he'd made selling the bull," admitted Adolfo.

"Or he should have given his money for safekeeping to someone responsible," said another man.

"He should have had enough sense not to ride out alone at night," Soto stated.

"How did the news get here so fast?" Efraín asked.

"I was there," Adolfo said. "I happened to be in the cantina last night. It got late, so I slept on the bench. At dawn some boy ran in yelling about a dead man in the road. I hurried back here." In a land without street-lights, those who stayed late at the cantina often slept on the long bench that ran along one side.

Efraín remembered his errand. "Where's the storekeeper? I came to ask him about my sick cow." He was afraid to ask Soto outright if the cow had survived the night.

"He just left, to see the body," Adolfo said. "You know Mr. Ramos was a distant cousin of his."

"Your cow's still alive, but no better," Soto remarked. "It must be some sickness she got before you brought her to my place. None of my cows have it."

"I didn't see the bull when I was there yesterday."

"Ramos brought it right after you left."

Efraín asked the other men if they'd ever run across the symptoms his cow had. They each had a different idea about what it might be, but no one seemed sure. There was no help for it. He'd have to hike to the cantina to find the storekeeper.

"I'm going that way," said Soto. "You can ride that bay horse tied to the tree. I think my son's staying here for a while."

The son had gone over to the store and was chatting through the window with the girls. They were giggling, the cattleman's tragedy forgotten.

Efraín suspected that Soto was mainly worried that if the cow died he wouldn't get the four sacks of corn that they'd agreed on as a breeding fee. But that was no reason not to take advantage of Soto's generosity, whatever its motive. Efraín untied the bay, mounted, and set off down the trail behind Soto.

Riding a horse certainly made distances seem short, Efraín thought. That was another thing he and Sulema had joked about, that if both their cows had calves this year, maybe they'd be able to buy a horse.

He looked at Soto, who sat his horse as though he grew out of the saddle. That was why Efraín hadn't recognized Soto at first today—he'd never seen the man off his horse. Even the day Soto and his wife had come over to pay a social call, soon after they'd moved to the area, Soto had hooked one leg over the saddle horn and stayed on his horse while he visited with Efraín in the yard.

Soto hadn't done much talking. Efraín had pointed out the different plants that he had growing around the place—papaya, mango, ginger, pineapple, vanilla, chocolate trees, star fruit, citrus, bananas, a cinnamon tree, and so forth. "Would you like some seeds and starters for your new farm?" he asked Soto.

"Waste of time to plant anything a cow won't eat," Soto had said, putting an end to that topic.

From what Efraín had overheard of the women's conversation, Sulema wasn't doing much better with Soto's hardfaced wife. Sulema was showing her the baby.

"He's so much fun for us!" Sulema said.

"That's because he's your first," the woman said. "Just wait."

"How many children do you have?" Sulema had asked, trying to keep the conversation going.

"Ten sons. No daughters. I told the oldest boy he'd better bring a girl home soon. I'm tired of doing all the work." The woman clamped her jaw shut.

That had been Efraín's introduction to Soto and his wife.

But they were his closest neighbors, except for Catalino, so he had to get along with them.

Efraín brought his attention back to the present. Here the trail veered toward the beach to avoid a jagged ridge that rose in front of them. A narrow strip of sand lay exposed between the waves and the cliff.

"Tide's coming in," Efraín ventured. "Good thing it's not high yet."

"Uumph."

At high tide the ocean pounded against the cliff, and no one could pass on the beach. The terrain above the cliffs was too rough for horses to cross, so trips to town had to be timed for low tide.

"I wonder who killed Mr. Ramos," Efraín said.

Soto shrugged.

"That close to town, they probably sent for the police."

Soto nodded.

Efraín tried to phrase a question that required a verbal answer. "Who broke the news to the storekeeper?"

"That old man who talks too much."

Soto must mean Adolfo. Efraín decided to hold his other questions for a more cooperative informant.

The cliffs flattened, and the horses turned back onto the trail, wide in

this more populated area. Soto and Efraín could ride side by side. It was hotter here, though, without the rain forest to shade them. Most of the land from here to town had been cleared for pastures.

Efraín wondered if the land where he lived would ever look like this. He doubted it. The forest up there was just too big. He couldn't imagine how many families would have to settle around his house to clear all the trees.

Their horses shied as a speedy black snake raced across the path. Efraín paid it no attention, knowing those snakes liked to eat the deadly fer-de-lances.

They rounded a curve and saw the cantina slumped in the heat. The sun glared off its tin roof. All four sides were open to welcome any stray breeze. Along one side was a weatherbeaten wooden bar with half a dozen stools in front of it.

A dozen men were gathered inside, perched on the stools or on the long bench. A sharp-eyed woman stood behind the bar.

A dusty old motorcycle rested to one side of the entrance. Efraín had seen it before, parked by the little square box of a police station in town. The seat had a rag neatly folded over a protruding spring. A soda bottle filled with water hung from the handlebars, tied on with a long length of good strong rope.

"Buenos días," everyone said.

Soto halted his horse. He and Efraín took in the tableau.

A very young man sat on a stool that had been pulled away from the bar. His olive uniform had faded almost to beige. Efraín assumed he was a policeman sent out from town. A battered valise lay at his feet.

Next to him, on another stool, sat a nervous middle-aged man. Sweat ran down his round face. He kept jerking his hand up to wipe it off.

Efraín recognized this man as an itinerant salesman who showed up at their place a few times a year peddling dishes, sewing supplies, and other household goods out of his valise. Once Sulema had bought a needle from him.

A flashy chestnut horse with four white stockings was tied under a mango tree. Its ears pricked forward as it studied the newcomers. The horse tossed its head in challenge.

"I'm looking for Lencho, the storekeeper," Efraín said.

"There," said the woman, pointing.

Efraín looked along the trail—now wide enough to be called a road—in the direction of town. In the distance he saw a long white shape on the ground. A man sat on the ground beside it. As there were no trees nearby, he held a palm frond over his head for shade.

"Since Lencho was the first relative to get here, he thought he should wait with Mr. Ramos until the rest of the family arrives," explained a man at the bar.

Efraín knew the body wouldn't be moved till the proper officials came

out from town and viewed it. They would take notes on the situation and collect names of witnesses to Mr. Ramos' last moments and to the discovery of the body. If there was an obvious suspect—and it looked as if there was—that person would have to go back to town with them.

Efraín nudged the bay in Lencho's direction. He was rather relieved that Soto stayed put.

"Such a shame," Lencho told Efraín. He clucked sympathetically at Mr. Ramos, who lay discreetly underneath a sheet. "I saw him ride by yesterday after he left Soto's. I thought he'd go straight home with the money. I never dreamed . . ."

"What happened exactly?" Efraín asked, getting off his horse.

"They say Fernando reached the cantina about dark. He said he'd have just one little glass of guaro to celebrate the sale. Well, you know how that goes."

Efraín had heard that Mr. Ramos enjoyed an occasional evening out.

"Besides, Belicia was tending bar last night," Lencho added.

Efraín recalled a few old stories.

"Fernando and Belicia were a couple, years ago," the storekeeper continued. "Then Fernando's next-door-neighbor died. It just seemed natural for Fernando to marry the man's daughter and combine the two ranches. I don't think Belicia was mad about it. She always sees the practical side of things. She asked her uncle to let her come out here and manage his cantina. I think she's happier as a manager than she would have been as a housewife."

Efraín squatted on his heels. A sturdy stick lay by the road. It was as big around as a staff but shorter. Efraín looked it over. Some dirt stuck to one end but no blood. He poked idly at a band of dry leaves that stretched across the road. "So Belicia and Mr. Ramos still enjoyed each other's company now and then?"

"Yes, I think so. And look where it got him."

They pondered the unfortunate Mr. Ramos.

Efraín crossed the road to sit down on a boulder. It was hot from the sun. He propped his feet on a smaller rock, getting as comfortable as he could. After a while he said, "I noticed that salesman sitting with the policeman in the cantina."

"Yes . . . poor fellow. He must have gotten tired of puffing around the hills, trying to make a living off spoons and thread. I suppose he gave in to temptation when he heard Fernando bragging about all the money he'd made on the bull."

"What makes people think the salesman killed Mr. Ramos?"

"He had the money in his valise." The storekeeper shook his head.

"The salesman was at the cantina last evening?"

"Yes. It got late, and most of the other customers left, Fernando last of all. The salesman lay down to sleep on the bench."

"Adolfo slept there, too?"

"Yes, but he's too deep a sleeper to know if the salesman went out and came back in the night. Belicia sleeps in the loft. She says she didn't hear anything. Of course, she always says that, no matter what you ask her." Lencho sniffed.

"Adolfo said a boy found the body."

Lencho snorted. "Old Adolfo may call him a boy. He's bigger than I am. The son of that fellow who lives in the green house between here and town. Wilfredo, that's his name. He woke everybody in the cantina, yelling, 'He's dead, he's dead.' They all ran to see. Belicia told Wilfredo to catch Fernando's horse—that chestnut tied by the cantina—and ride to town for the police, but the horse was too skittish. Can't blame it, the creature had just seen its owner murdered. So Belicia told him to get her old black mare out of the pasture, and that was how he went to town. More people showed up, neighbors attracted by the commotion. They finally did manage to catch Fernando's horse."

Efraín wanted to know how the scene had looked before dozens of neighbors trampled it. "Did Wilfredo come back with the policeman?" he asked.

"I don't think so. The old black mare would be too tired to come straight back without a rest first. And the policeman was probably afraid to put more than one person on that motorcycle."

"How did they know the money was in the salesman's valise?" Efraín asked.

"When the sun got hot, everybody went back to the cantina to wait for the police. Belicia brought out her mending to pass the time. She asked the salesman if he had a thimble. He opened his case to get one. Everyone crowded around to see his merchandise. In a corner of the case was a stack of money, all small bills. No one would touch it. When the policeman came, he counted the money. It's almost as much as Soto gave Fernando for the bull—Fernando spent some on guaro last night."

"How does the salesman explain the money?"

"Not very well," the storekeeper said. "He claims that yesterday in town he ran into an old friend. They hadn't seen each other in years. The salesman says this man had borrowed money from him long ago. When they met yesterday, the man said he was now in a position to pay his debt with interest. He pulled out a wad of money and handed it to the salesman."

"It should be easy to find the old friend and ask if the story's true."

"According to the salesman, the man mentioned he now lives abroad somewhere. He was only in town for one day. There's no way to contact him. You'd think the salesman would have come up with a better story."

"Yes, you'd think he would have."

Lencho fanned himself with the palm frond. "It's nice to have company, Efraín, but you don't have to stay here in the sun," he said.

"Well . . . maybe I will go back to the shade for a while. I'm very sorry about your cousin." Efraín hadn't forgotten about his sick cow, but he needed to ask Soto something before the man rode off on whatever errand had brought him here.

Soto was still on his horse. He'd moved over to the mango tree to get a better look at the chestnut. "What sort of bills did you give Mr. Ramos?" Efraín asked.

"Small bills. The policeman asked me that. I don't remember how many of which kind, though. More or less what was in the valise. When Ramos' widow gets here I may make her an offer for this horse."

Efraín dismounted and tied the bay to the tree. He eased over to the chestnut. "Good shoulders," he said.

"Means a smooth gait," Soto concurred.

The chestnut stamped its hoof with displeasure at Efraín's presence. This was exactly the kind of animal a well-to-do cattleman would ride, steady for its owner but independent with strangers. Efraín knew it was in a category beyond anything he and Sulema would ever own, except in their dreams. But he enjoyed looking.

Efraín studied the most important part of the horse, its legs. He didn't see any bone or joint problems, but the sleek white stockings were marred by several raw scrapes.

Efraín looked around the countryside while wondering if he should tell Soto to wait a few days before bothering the widow with business. Beyond the cantina pasture he saw a small pink house nearly smothered by purple bougainvillea. The Vargas family lived there, he recalled. Was that a face peering through the flowers? Efraín ducked through the barbed wire fence and cut across the pasture.

"Mr. Vargas!" Efraín greeted the man through masses of bloom. "How are you?"

"More or less, more or less. My rheumatism, you know. And then this scandalous event. Lucky we weren't murdered in our bed. Marta's nerves—"

"Yes, it's terrible," Efraín interrupted. "How did you hear about it?"

"I had just climbed into the hammock on the porch to let my breakfast settle. Suddenly I heard an awful yelling coming from the cantina. Marta ran out of the house with a dishcloth in her hand. I hadn't seen her run since a hawk tried to steal her best laying hen three years ago. 'I knew something horrible would happen, living this close to a cantina,' she said. You know, she thinks we should have built our house over by her parents' place when we got married."

The Vargases had married thirty years before.

Efraín tried to remember why he'd come to see Mr. Vargas. "I heard Mr. Ramos was beaten. Did you see the body?"

"Yes, Marta came back for a sheet, and I covered him with it. I sup-

pose he was beaten to death—he wasn't shot or stabbed. I didn't see any marks on him. I don't think it was that salesman. More likely a gang from the city did it. Young people don't know how to work any more. No respect, either. When I was six years old, my papa put a machete in my hand and said, 'Son, you see this ricefield? I want all the weeds out of it by dark.' Well, I whacked and chopped till—"

Mrs. Vargas stepped out of the house and poked her husband with her sun umbrella. "He doesn't want your life story," she told him. "And I think you're wrong about a gang. That horse wouldn't let even one stranger come up to it at night. It was dark of the moon, remember. I think it was somebody Mr. Ramos trusted, who got right next to the horse and then yanked him off and hit him on the head with something. A person who knew he was too drunk to struggle." She gave Efraín a meaningful look, then gestured toward Lencho in the distance. "I'm taking that poor man some lemonade." She held up a tall glass.

Efraín really wanted to talk to the young man who'd found the body. He excused himself and went back to the cantina.

"Hot day," he commented to the room at large.

People nodded.

He turned to Belicia. "Has Wilfredo come back yet?"

She shook her head. "He better not have lamed my mare."

The policeman spoke up. "You mean the fellow who came for me this morning? I think he stayed in town. He was awfully upset. I saw him let the mare loose to eat grass in front of the station. Saves me having to cut it." The policeman went out to his motorcycle, untied the water bottle, and drank. He brought the bottle inside and offered it to the salesman, who also had a long drink.

"Anyone else?" the policeman asked, waving the bottle in the air.

Efraín had some; he knew Belicia wouldn't offer anyone water. She was hoping they'd get thirsty enough to buy soft drinks from her.

The policeman retied the bottle onto the motorcycle.

"Nice rope," Efraín told him. "You don't have to worry about losing your water bottle when you hit a pothole."

"That's what I hope!" The young policeman seemed glad to have a neutral topic of conversation. "When I started out this morning, I'd gone only a couple of yards when my old rope broke and the bottle fell off. But luck was with me. I looked around a bit in the weeds and found this one."

Efraín leaned back on the bench. He wished Sulema were here. He hadn't even said goodbye to her this morning. He should have told her about the cow. She might even have known what was wrong with it. She liked that cow so much she'd given her a name.

He still hadn't asked Lencho's advice. Well, there was plenty of time. He was stuck on this side of the cliffs till high tide passed.

Efraín missed his neighbor Catalino, too. Where had he gone? Probably to visit his people, who lived scattered deep in the rain forest.

Efraín watched Belicia slowly drag a rag along the scarred wooden bar. How much had Mr. Ramos hurt her when he married his neighbor's daughter? Belicia was strong, and tough from years of dealing with difficult customers. Had she killed for revenge and planted the money in the salesman's valise to draw attention away from herself? But the salesman didn't deny the money was his.

Belicia certainly could have followed Mr. Ramos when he left and called to him to stop once they were out of hearing of the cantina. She could have stepped up beside the horse and taken Mr. Ramos' hand. Then a quick tug and a blow with a heavy bottle or rock.

Efraín turned his gaze to Soto, who along with his family had appeared out of nowhere a few months before. ~~No one knew Soto's past.~~ His cows hadn't produced their first crop of calves yet. How had Soto come up with enough money to buy a bull and have enough left to consider buying a fine horse? Had he decided to take back the money he'd paid for the bull?

But there were dozens of other possible suspects. The whole community had known Mr. Ramos was selling the bull to Soto. The people who lived along the road would have seen Mr. Ramos ride by leading the bull, and come back without it. Everyone in the cantina had heard him boasting about how much money he'd made. Plain greed was always a motive. Or it could have been an old grudge, forgotten by everyone except the grudge-holder.

Efraín looked down at his hands. There were several short black and white hairs, from a horse or a cow, stuck to the palms. That reminded him of his cow.

"Something's wrong with my cow," he said to everyone in the cantina, and described the symptoms.

No one had any helpful advice.

Efraín wanted a close look at the road between the cantina and the body. He returned on foot to where Lencho continued to sit under his wilting palm frond, keeping Mr. Ramos company. Lencho couldn't help with the cow problem either.

The stout stick still lay by the side of the road where the band of leaves ended. Efraín scuffed the toe of his rubber boot through the leaves. Where they ended at the edge of the road, he found a hole the same diameter as the stick and half its length. A low grinding noise rumbled in the distance.

"That'll be the judge's Landcruiser," Lencho said, sounding relieved. "I expect he went to get the Ramos family from their ranch and that's what took so long."

Efraín walked toward the cantina. He didn't notice anything else out of the ordinary along the road. He went inside and whispered to Belicia for a moment. She gave him a deadly look. Then Efraín came back out

and knelt by the motorcycle to examine the rope holding the water bottle.

He motioned to the policeman, who joined him.

"What do you see on this rope?" Efraín asked.

The policeman squinted at it. "Black and white hairs from a cow or horse. It's a farm rope, that's what you'd expect to see on it."

"If you go to where the body lies, you'll see a short, strong stick lying there and a band of leaves spread across the road."

"I remember seeing the leaves."

"There aren't any trees around that place. Where did the leaves come from?"

The policeman took in the scenery, bare pastures with low grass. His eyes came to rest on the carpet of dry leaves under the mango tree.

"Yes, they're mango leaves. Someone carried them from here," Efraín said. "Why? To cover something that lay across the road—something that would scare a horse, something like a snake." Efraín looked at the policeman.

The policeman blinked. "A rope," he said at last.

"The person didn't want the horse shying and running away with Mr. Ramos and his money . . . there's a hole at the side of the road, across from that boulder, that the stick would fit into."

The policeman gazed along the road. "On a dark night, that boulder would hide a person who was crouched down low."

"You found the rope outside the police station. Who would throw down such a good rope? Either someone very rich, or—"

"A person who was upset and not thinking clearly—"

"And who didn't plan on ever needing the rope again."

The people in the cantina were keeping absolute silence, trying to catch every word.

Efraín cleared his throat. "Did you happen to notice the hands of the young man who reported the crime?"

"Yes, I did because they were shaking so badly. The skin was scraped raw across one palm," the policeman said. Efraín stared at the ground. "Wilfredo needed, or just wanted, money. Like everyone else, he knew Mr. Ramos was selling Soto a bull," he said. "I suppose he happened to approach the cantina last night and observed the drunk Mr. Ramos bragging about his money. He probably listened in the shadows for a while. No one would have seen him; it was the dark of the moon. He worked out a plan—at first it might have been just idle thought. Unfortunately, he put it into motion. He scooped up an armful of mango leaves and carried them down the road to that boulder," Efraín pointed.

"Mr. Ramos stayed at the cantina for hours, so Wilfredo had plenty of time to collect a strong stick, a rope, and a rock," he went on. "He pounded the stick into the ground with the rock and tied one end of the rope to it. I expect he laid the rope across the road in coils to better entangle

the horse's legs. He covered the rope with leaves and crouched behind the boulder, waiting. In his hand he held the loose end of the rope."

"How could he be sure he had the right horse and rider?" the policeman asked, then answered himself. "Oh, the white stockings."

"Yes, that was probably all he saw—four white legs coming down the road. At exactly the right moment he leaped up and yanked with all his strength on the rope. The horse tried to bolt, but its legs were caught. In that situation it would naturally buck. The rope cut into Wilfredo's palm. The horse, being of course stronger than a human, got out of the rope in seconds. But by then Mr. Ramos, not at his most alert, had fallen off. That was what Wilfredo wanted.

"He might then have given Mr. Ramos a tap on the head with the rock, or he might not have hit him at all if the man was already unconscious. I'm sure he never intended to kill Mr. Ramos. There would have been no need to. In almost total darkness, and full of guaro, even if the cattleman were conscious he would have no idea who assaulted him.

"The young man felt for the money and couldn't find it. I don't think he would have used a flashlight; someone could have spotted it from the cantina. He finally gave up and left.

"At dawn he came back to search the leaves for the money, thinking it might have fallen out of Mr. Ramos' pocket. He also had to collect the rope, which he must have forgotten the night before. He expected Mr. Ramos would have come to his senses in the night and staggered back to the cantina to sleep, maybe thinking his horse had just had a bucking fit and not even realizing he'd been attacked.

"Imagine the young man's shock when he found Mr. Ramos dead in the road. When they take the body to town and the doctor examines it, I expect he'll find a broken neck or fatal head injury which occurred in the fall—not from an attack."

"What made you look at the rope?" the policeman asked.

"I noticed black and white hairs on my hands. I rode here on a bay. I realized they must have come off your damp water bottle. They'd stuck to it from the rope. The white hairs got on the rope when Wilfredo tripped the horse with white stockings. When Belicia told Wilfredo to catch her mare, he used the rope he had at hand—his own—and black hairs got on it."

"How did Ramos' money get into the salesman's valise?" asked someone else.

"It didn't. That money belonged to the salesman, just as he said."

The salesman nodded vigorously.

Everyone let out their breath. Belicia stepped in front of the bar. She bent to pick up a squeezed lime-half; it had fallen to the floor.

"Wilfredo has probably headed for the city, hoping to lose himself there," Efraim added.

Mr. and Mrs. Vargas had walked across the pasture and stood out-

side the cantina, listening to Efraín. "Wilfredo's father let him spend too much time in the city, visiting his cousins," said Mr. Vargas. "He must have picked up bad morals there. I should have known he was the one."

"Someone's going to have to tell his father," a man said.

"Isn't the judge a sort of uncle to the family?" asked the policeman. Everyone discussed the degree of relatedness.

Mr. Vargas said, "But what happened to Fernando's money? How do you know the boy didn't find it on him and steal it?"

Efraín looked at Belicia. She was back behind the bar. "I wonder if it fell out of his pocket while he was sitting at the bar," she said. "That's happened before. A person pulls out his money to pay for a drink, and when he tries to stuff it back into his pocket, it slips to the floor instead."

Everyone looked at her.

"Why doesn't someone check?" she added.

The policeman walked over and pulled the stools out of the way. He bent down and opened a pocket knife. He slid the blade into the crack between the floor and the wooden counter, and fished out a tight roll of bills.

"Yes, they must have fallen," Belicia said. "Then someone accidentally kicked them under the bar." She held her head high and stared everyone down.

Outside, Soto's horse neighed as another horse trotted up. "Hi, Pop," said the rider to Soto. "Thought I'd come over and see what was happening. Walked home and got another horse. Tide had just fallen low enough to pass." He looked in the cantina and noticed the salesman. "Say, aren't you that guy who sells trinkets? I need a present. For a girl."

The salesman glanced at the policeman, then leaped off the stool and snatched up his valise. "Of course, all kinds of nice gifts," he said. He laid the case on the bench and opened it. He grabbed the wad of bills. "I better put this in my pocket. It's caused me enough problems."

Everyone watched as the salesman rummaged through his goods.

"Crochet thread for the lacy tablecloths I'm sure she makes," he told Soto's son. "Beautiful ribbons for her hair, wide satin. Variety of colors." The salesman held them up so they danced in the breeze. "Deluxe sewing kit: two needles, a dozen spools of thread, and a thimble." He cast a malevolent glance at Belicia.

"Enameled tin coffee cup with painted flower design." He made a quick assessment of his customer's economic status, taking in the new shirt and sporty watch. "Or to please her even more, a whole set of cups, with these plates to match."

"How much are the satin hair ribbons?" asked Soto's son.

The salesman told him.

Soto's son made a face. "Something cheaper."

The salesman evaluated his wares. "Ah, just the thing." He picked up some yarn ties. "Also for her hair, but more inexpensive. Very economical. She will be happy, and so will your pocket." He laughed.

Soto's son chose two yarn ties, handed over a few coins, and went back outside.

Belicia bought a painted cup and plate. Efraín wasn't sure if it was to make up for what she'd nearly allowed to happen to the salesman, or to cheer herself for having to renounce all that money.

The judge's battered Landcruiser had reached the scene of the crime and was discharging officials and Ramos relatives.

The policeman bought a pair of sewing scissors for his mother. "I'd better hurry over and explain things to those officials," he said, adjusting the rag over the spring in the motorcycle seat. "When they get back to town, they'll want to phone the city police, to have them look for Wilfredo. I have to give this money to Mrs. Ramos, too."

The salesman was about to close his valise when Efraín stepped up. "I'd like to see those satin hair ribbons."

"Certainly." The salesman lifted them out. They floated gaily in a band of afternoon sun that swept through the cantina. Efraín wiped his hands on his pants and gently touched the yellow one. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a bill, worn soft as cloth. He rarely had any money on him; it was fortunate, he thought, that today he did. His eyes wandered back to the valise, to a small mirror set in a wooden frame with white roses painted on it. "Would this be enough for a ribbon and that mirror, too?"

"Oh yes." The salesman started to take the bill. Then he pushed Efraín's hand away. He stuffed the ribbon and the mirror in Efraín's shirt pocket and closed his valise. "Take them. It's the least I can do to thank you. Now I'm going to run over and see if I can get a ride to town in that Landcruiser." He rushed out.

Efraín jogged along the beach on the bay horse. Soto had ridden a few miles farther toward town to take care of his errand. He had told Efraín to ride the horse home and bring it back to Soto's in the morning. Efraín would be going over anyway to check on his cow—he'd probably have to bury her then, he thought glumly. He doubted that she'd last much longer. They couldn't eat her, not knowing what the sickness was.

He'd have to tell Sulema about the cow tonight.

Efraín approached his palm-thatched house in the twilight. A small stocky figure was walking away from it.

"Catalino!" Efraín called. "Where've you been?"

Catalino turned. "Went to visit my people," he said. "By the way, I fixed your cow."

"You fixed my cow!"

"I met one of Soto's sons on the trail. He mentioned your cow was sick. I went to see."

"What did she have? How did you treat her?"

Catalino raised his eyebrows. "She had a lesson about not eating too

fast. She swallowed an orange while she was grazing, I suppose. It stuck halfway down. That's why she could hardly breathe. I reached down her throat and pulled the orange out. I came over to tell you she's all right now."

"—so Mr. Ramos must have realized he'd had too much guaro to take proper care of his money," Efraín said. He stood behind Sulema, holding the mirror for her while she twisted the yellow ribbon into her long hair. "Mr. Ramos slipped the money over the bar to Belicia and asked her to hold it for him. After he was dead, she thought she might as well keep it. She didn't care what happened to the salesman."

Sulema shook her head. "Some people can't be understood. I hope the storekeeper's daughter has sense enough not to go off with Soto's son for a pair of cheap yarn hair ties," she said. "She's a sweet girl, not too bright maybe but she'll learn." Sulema wound the coil of hair onto her head. The ribbon glistened in the candlelight. "How does this look?"

Efraín couldn't resist. He reached out and tugged on the ribbon. Glossy black hair tumbled across Sulema's shoulders. "You got an expensive satin ribbon. See how lucky you are?" he said. "You could have ended up with one of the Soto clan."

"You and your foolishness," she retorted, coiling her hair again. "You forgot to buy salt. You'll have to eat your dinner saltless tonight unless you feel like walking over to Catalino's in the dark to borrow some." She had her back to him but he could see the curve of her smile.

Capriccio for Unaccompanied Violin

S. L. Franklin

R. J. Begins:

The home of Byron L. Davis was almost new, virtually isolated in the countryside, and nearly the size and general likeness of the rural English manor houses you get a glimpse of sometimes in old Hitchcock movies. Instead of appearing to rise up out of the landscape, though, the way those generally do, the Davis place seemed as if it had been prefabricated elsewhere and lowered by a squadron of helicopters onto the wrong plot of ground, a treeless hillock that overlooked a year-old artificial lake to the west, a newly completed golf course to the east, and the poured concrete foundations of structures similar to itself to the north and south.

It was midafternoon when I got out of the Chevy at the base of the hillock, and partly because I'd spent most of the day driving, I took a minute or so to stretch and look around before I tackled the ascent. The weather was warm for early April—at least in south-central Wisconsin—but the lake on the other side of the road was still an irregular stretch of soggy looking ice, and if the terraced lawn rising up to the house had ten green blades of grass on it, that was all it had.

I walked across to the verge of the lake and stared down at the grayish slush for a moment before I turned back and climbed the brick

and pink-stone steps. As I got within about forty feet of the entrance, I could hear, from an open case-ment, the sound of a violin being played by someone with limited talent, and the inevitable recollection sprang to mind, from a radio program of my boyhood, of Jack Benny sawing away at "Love in Bloom."

The person who came to answer the door wasn't the violin player but a tall, muscular-looking male of around thirty in stylish tan slacks and a matching cotton sweater. He looked me over through the storm door to make certain I wasn't peddling *The Watchtower*, peered past me down the slope at the Chevy, then opened the door a crack.

"What is it?"

I handed him one of my cards and said, "Václav Hucek—he's still missing."

He propped the door with his foot and examined the card closely, then fanned it with one hand against the opposite thumb.

"Mr. Davis can't tell you anything," he said.

"Then I won't take much of his time," I responded.

He looked me over again with the air of someone about to be forced by circumstance into committing an unpleasant but necessary act, so I drew the door open suddenly and said, "Look—I can come back with the sheriff if you want, but that's

what you don't want and the sheriff won't want it either if he has to come. Why not just skip the stale repartee and show me in? You can make jokes about my looks and my cheap suit after I'm gone."

I stepped inside, forcing him back a pace, into a large parqueted foyer. "The name is R. J. Carr, just the way it reads on the card. Who are you?"

He stepped back two more paces as if he didn't want to be close, but he did let me come in. The truth is, although he was big and tall, I was bigger and taller and tougher looking even though I'd just turned forty-eight. It was one of the few scenarios in which my birthmarked cheek and thick glasses were an asset.

"I'm . . . Mr. Davis's man-of-all-work," he said. "I manage the accounts, supervise the out-source help, cook, play games—" he hardened his stare "—such as chess and golf."

"Do you have a name?"

"Clive Macmillan."

"Were you here, Mr. Macmillan, on the night of December fifth?"

"Yes. But I can't tell you anything either. Hucek never arrived, and that's the extent of our knowledge on the subject."

One of a pair of doors inset with stained glass opened to my right, and a tall, pear-shaped specimen choking a violin by the throat leaned out. "Is the man asking about Václav, Clive? Show him in."

" . . . which, as you must have heard, was the evening of the ice storm, followed the next morning

by two feet of snow." Davis was a young-looking sixty in spite of his spreading waist and hips, a retired stockbroker and budding real estate tycoon from Chicago by way of Lake Geneva forty miles to the south of where we sat. He collected things in a small way, he told me: rare stamps and currency, not coins, an antique car or two. Mansion Lakes, the development outside the window, was his conception, so to speak, without being his concern—except for the one house—or not until it proved itself, at which time he was leveraged to buy in heavily.

In our first five minutes, in other words, Davis gave me the insider's story of his life.

He had played the violin as a young man, he'd said, and for the past six years had resumed his musical studies by taking master lessons every other week from Václav Hucek, formerly concertmaster of the Prague Symphony Orchestra, well-known soloist, and currently—one hoped currently—professor emeritus of the University of Wisconsin music faculty, who had retired to the Lake Geneva area in 1984.

"Václav was stubborn about his driving," Davis said, "and that's why I called to tell him not to come. He was to have dinner here and stay the night as he usually did, but even by four thirty our little byway was like a sheet of glass. Unfortunately, he'd already left home by then, or so one must assume, since he didn't answer the telephone. At seven thirty, when he was two hours late, I called again." He shook his head, then turned to stare across the

room. "It's been a shocking thing to me, Mr. Carr. I—sometimes I seem to see him, out of the corner of my eye, you know. But of course—" He drew his gaze back to me. "My playing has deteriorated. He was a wonderful teacher."

Davis had been alternately tuning and sighting along the violin for much of our conversation. "Do you play, by chance?" he asked me, gesturing with the instrument.

"Organ and piano," I admitted. "Not as much as I used to. That's a beautiful violin, though."

"Yes," he said. "Not a true collector's piece or I wouldn't dare to play it but quite old, rebuilt many times, so Václav says." He paused, then went on. "Oh, it is worth something, and I shouldn't belittle it. Possibly by one of the lesser Amatis or . . . possibly not."

"Not a Stradivarius, at any rate," I said. I stood up from where we'd been sitting in Davis's intimate little library-music room—twenty feet by thirty by twenty feet high with a sky-lit ceiling. He stood, too.

"When's a good time to call you, Mr. Davis, in case I need to check back? Doesn't seem likely right now, I know, but—" I shrugged.

"I wish you would call, Mr. Carr, if you find out anything about poor Václav. Anything at all." He pondered with a hand to his chin. "Mornings are best because I'm always here. Weekdays only, though, and not too early, please. I'm no longer a slave to the opening bell on Wall Street."

"Sure," I said. He gave me his telephone number and accompanied me to the front door.

"It's strange that Václav never mentioned having a brother," he said.

"Oh, when someone disappears, a next-of-kin is bound to show up eventually, wanting to know what happened. Your friend is someplace between here and Lake Geneva, Mr. Davis, let's not kid ourselves. He just hasn't been found yet. He's buried under fallen brush in a ravine or off in some woods, hidden from the highway, probably still behind the wheel of his car. If he came in a direct line, he was traveling county roads most of the way—in the dark, in hard, freezing rain. And he was seventy-four."

"Driving that little car, too. I think they should be outlawed."

Davis and I said goodbye with Clive Macmillan looking on in the background, and I couldn't help wondering, as I descended to the Chevy, what kind of conversation they might be having in my immediate absence.

I took the obvious alternate route south to Lake Geneva, watching without conviction for sites where Hucek might have strayed from the road and stopping to investigate four of them with the same negative results I had had on the trip north. The truth, though, was that if Hucek really had left the highway for some accidental or voluntary reason and gotten himself even further lost, then after four months' time and two official searches—the second following the spring melt-off—only luck or unforeseen happenstance was going to lead me to him. I didn't have faith in either

of these alternatives mainly because the situation was developing a different kind of feel to me.

The drive from Lake Geneva home to the Chicago suburbs gave me some time to mull the problem over, with the result that the next day when I had an hour free I put in a long distance call to the editor of the *Walworth County Beacon*, a biweekly paper out of Lake Geneva that had given the disappearance a front page headline a few days after it had happened.

"Yeah. This is Paul Zimmer," said a sharp voice.

"My name is Carr," I said. "I've been hired by Václav Hucek's brother to—"

"Yeah, I heard about that. And brother—believe you me—I wish you luck."

"Why?" I asked.

"Why? You're not God, are you? Or Superman? No X-ray vision? What I've said right along is, find the car and you'll find the man. But the car—wow. Uh-uh."

"Well, yeah. And that's why I'd like to try a different starting point," I said.

"A bright idea, only it won't work."

"Why not?"

The line went silent briefly, then he replied, "Don't mind me, Mr. Carr. I was just being cute. But if there's a different starting point, you're the party that's going to have to supply it."

"Fine. Tell me about Václav Hucek."

"Why? No—never mind. I see the inference. I don't buy it, but I see it. And Hucek was a strange bird, all right—notice the use of the past

tense—but I'll tell you this, Mr. Carr, he wasn't the kind of strange bird that flies away.

"He was what you'd probably call an eccentric, and my feeling is that some of it was phony but most of it wasn't. If you saw him, you'd remember him, believe me, because he always wore a formal black suit with a tailcoat and a high collar—like he was on his way to a performance, you know—and in person he acted like the grand maestro. I interviewed him once just after he retired and got the full treatment: thick accent, big gestures, air of superiority. And mysterious, my God, did the guy like to act mysterious."

"How?" I asked.

"The Paganini thing. He and Paganini were soulmates. You've heard of Paganini? I had to look him up. Nineteenth century virtuoso violinist, supposedly had the ladies swooning in the aisles. Hucek and Paganini 'shared a sacred musical and spiritual bond'—I'm quoting—only don't ask how or why or you'll get the icy stare of the maestro. Actually, Hucek was well known on this score, but I was the hick reporter. The tailcoat—that was Paganini. Also the flamboyant gestures. Also Hucek's style of playing the violin.

"In my own defense, though, by the time Hucek retired, he wasn't such a big noise. In the fifties and sixties behind the Iron Curtain he was a pretty hot number as a soloist, but he never came on that strong in the U.S. Defected in 1968 with his wife. Had open heart surgery in '76 and took the . . . what's it called? The Stenstrom Chair for Violin

Studies, I think, over at Madison. That was '77. Mandated retirement in '84. Came here because his wife liked Lake Geneva and picked up two hundred bucks per half hour giving lessons to hotshot kids and dilettantes of indeterminate gender like that Davis character he was on his way to see when the storm hit.

"Oh. His wife died about three years ago, and that reminds me of the guy's last eccentricity. Supposedly, from the time she was laid out, he never went anyplace without a violin case under his arm—grocery shopping, walking on the beach."

"Any theories on that?" I asked.

"Well, wherever he's gone, that's where the violin case has gone, too. It's got a violin in it; don't get me wrong. It's not filled with money or one of his wife's nightgowns because people have seen him take it out and play it while he was standing by the lake."

"And . . . what else? This is the last free tidbit because I've got a paper to run, but there's a story that I don't vouch for saying that when Hucek defected he brought with him some pretty rare and valuable instruments—one, three, or five, depending on the source—that were technically the property of the Czech government. His practice room, which I was in the one time, had, I'd like to say, at least four violins in display cases and one of those big ones—a cello—and some things like guitars only they weren't. The official word, though, was that nothing was taken, so . . . I don't see much in this particular angle, frankly."

I thanked him and we said good-

bye. But that evening on the vaguest kind of hunch I spent an hour and a half in our local library digging around at the real and rumored biography of a man who had been dead for one hundred fifty years named Niccolò Paganini.

At around ten thirty the following Saturday morning a man who looked suspiciously like myself was strolling along the edge of a county highway in south central Wisconsin near a sign inviting persons of easy means and limitless credulity to consider a future at Mansion Lakes. This man wore a hunter's cap, a well-worn tan windbreaker, and a pair of field binoculars on a strap around his neck. On occasion he would peer earnestly through the binoculars into the woods on the opposite side of the road in the apparent hope of spotting a creature perched on a twig with a brain at least the size of his own. Or such seemed to be the man's innermost desire.

At ten thirty-eight a metallic gray Ford station wagon slowed as it passed him on the pavement and came to a halt on the shoulder a hundred feet ahead. He trotted up to the car and climbed in on the passenger's side before glancing across at the driver, a black-haired woman dressed in tweeds whose mature beauty was capable of stopping traffic on that particular or any other stretch of highway in the universe. Except for the tweeds she looked remarkably like the man's wife, Ginny.

"You were right—as usual," she said in a low, clear tone.

"I was afraid of that," I replied. I looked out at the mild, cloudless sky. "Well. If we're going to do it, we're going to do it."

"Yes. Breaking and entering in broad daylight—how to bring new excitement into your humdrum married life. Do Wisconsin jails allow conjugal visits?"

She drove the Ford ahead, reversed our course in the next lane, and braked to a halt five minutes later in front of the Byron Davis house. "I knocked seven times even though I felt silly doing it," she said, "Perhaps you should, too."

"Nope," I said. "I feel silly enough as is. Just blow that whistle if you see them coming."

We kissed for no special reason except that we always do; then I got out and looked around before climbing the steps. Golfers blocked from view by the hillock; no construction crews in sight; no farmers in the distant fields—only the occasional hum of a passing vehicle on the road beyond the artificial berm at the opposite end of the lake. And no one in the house. I hoped.

From the top of the hillock I could peer down and see Ginny standing beside the Ford with a scarf around her head and a police whistle hidden in her palm. She looked up and noticed me and made shooing motions, so I had to put on my gloves and go to work.

In the detective and security business, the business I happen to be in, you learn a lot about things like locks and alarms, and you notice such improvements as home protection systems as a matter of course. Davis's new house had a lot

of peripheral protection, but the front door stood vulnerable to anyone with the right key—or that was my assessment on my previous visit—and so I'd brought two bunches of Grunwalds along, eighty-three in all. Just into the second bunch, one of them turned freely and put me inside the entry.

The double doors to the library were unlocked, which saved a minute, and I was pulling out the drawers of a collector's safe in no time, thanks to another bunch of keys. Of course Davis's "small" collection amounted to hundreds of items, and it took me a couple of minutes even to figure out the organization, not that Ginny and I expected to find what we wanted correctly classified anyway.

After five minutes of random search with no luck, I took a break from the safe and walked around the room to try for some kind of new inspiration by looking at books and artifacts. Davis's violin had a place of honor in a locked glass case, and even though it seemed like the absolute least promising possibility, I gave it a thorough examination by flashlight, especially inside the soundholes. Just as I finished I heard the honk of a car horn, which meant I had five minutes left out of the twenty I'd allowed, not the happiest development. I glanced around the room again, still feeling stymied.

What it boiled down to, I decided, was a single question that I didn't have an answer for: exactly how clever did Davis think he was? Ginny probably would have spotted it right away, but I only caught on when I looked down at the violin

another time and took real notice that in the same glass case, beside the glowing wood of the instrument, rested the polished leather of a very fine old Bible, printed in what I made out to be Italian and open to the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew.

I hadn't planned on breaking into the case, but that's what I did then, after I picked the lock. The book seemed too fragile to riffle, and even touching it worried me, but the first two leaves turned easily and well, and as it turned out, those were all I needed to see. Adhering to the title page of the New Testament was an ancient label that read GIUSEPPE GUARNERI IHS.

I turned the pages of the Bible back to Matthew 1, locked the glass case, replaced everything as I'd found it in the collector's safe, and examined the room a last time to make sure I wasn't leaving any traces of unauthorized entry.

My watch said it was time to go, but I found the main stair and hurried to the top of the house instead, where I could look out and down at the melting ice of the lake, using the binoculars I still had with me. I didn't see anything important, but that didn't matter. What mattered was the car horn beeping twice. I descended carefully, locked the door on my way out, pulled off my white gloves, and joined the woman in tweeds for a quick getaway to her uncle's farm and orchard ten miles north of Lake Geneva, the place where the trouble had begun.

On an evening two weeks earlier

Ginny had called me to the telephone.

"R. J., you big old grampus," said her Uncle Peter over the phone line, "how would you like some work?"

"What kind of work?" I asked him back.

"Well, it's quite a story, if you can listen."

"Sure. Only I don't take payment in apples." A lie if the job was for him.

"Nope," he replied. "Ten thousand dollars—maybe. At first they . . . nope. Let me back up and start off right. Are you ready?"

"I was out along County D this morning, you see, round about eleven, pruning some broken branches and looking over the stock, when a car pulls up and two guys climb out and come on over to talk. Well, I'm always ready to talk, but I couldn't barely understand the one, and he was translating for the other. Seems this one I'm talking to is the son-in-law of the other one, and the other one is the seventy-four-year-old twin brother of a retired violin teacher from down by the lake, only the violin teacher went and disappeared—now I remember reading about it—back in that twenty-two inch storm we had before Christmas. This pair are straight from Prague, Czechoslovakia, and they've saved up their kopecks or whatever and come up here to try to find the missing brother themselves because the Wisconsin Highway Patrol don't know its job.

"Let me tell you, R. J., these poor guys looked even more lost than they were, and I'm wondering what

the Sam Hill possessed 'em to try this stunt until they mention Richard Mumphrey—"Slick Dick" is what we call him hereabouts—who's the lawyer assigned by the county court to oversee the violin teacher's property. Am I being clear?"

"Sure," I said. "You invited them in for lunch and told them you've got a nephew by marriage—"

"Well, they looked hungry, you're right, and I couldn't see this pair standing much of a chance if they'd let Slick Dick send 'em off, chasing wild geese from here to up near Watertown.

"So, yeah—Judy and I fed 'em some grub and got the story out of 'em. The violin teacher's actually a big name sort of guy—from Czechoslovakia, of course—played fiddle with all the top symphonies at one time and was a professor over at Madison a few years, too. Widower, no children, so this brother from back in the old country is the guy's next of kin, and eventually even Slick Dick probably had to drop a card in the mail and let him know what had happened."

"And the lawyer's in no hurry to find what's probably a dead man because he can milk the estate for fees for the next five years—"

"You got it, R. J., and this couple of Czechs had pretty much got it, too, by the time I was through with 'em. The missing man owns a nice little place down near the west end of the lake worth a hundred and a half—I swung over and took a look—plus some CD's in the bank and some valuable violins and what not, plus whatever Slick Dick is holding back on.

"But I told 'em if the troopers and such hadn't found the old guy they'd never do it themselves, which I think they realized about two miles out of town. I also told 'em my niece's husband had a nose like a bloodhound on this kind of thing but you were a professional and you'd have to come up from Chicago and you didn't work for free.

"So, you know, R. J., I was sort of wondering if you might consider helping these fellas out on spec. They'll pay your expenses—and if they can't, I will, what the hell. But if you find the old guy's remains—he went off the road some damn place, sure as apple cider—they've volunteered to put up ten thousand dollars from the estate. Mum's the word with Slick Dick about it, of course. They're heading back to Prague day after tomorrow, so . . ."

So that's how the story began: with myself, as usual, on the hook—but also with a small, professional reservation, which I kept to myself, about the proposed size of the fee.

Ginny Concludes:

The story ended much differently, and on one of those truly spring-like days in early May when the temperature is eighty degrees, the wind blows in quickening gusts, and an overcast sky threatens rain from four or five different types of clouds.

At eleven A.M. on that particular morning a small convoy of vehicles turned into the Mansion Lakes development from the county highway and followed the winding road beside the water to a point perhaps

two hundred yards short of the Byron L. Davis residence. It halted and persons from four of the six vehicles emerged to confer, each of them making occasional gestures at the nearest approach to the lake, which along this abbreviated stretch consists of a moderately steep slope of lush green grass ending in deep, murky waters.

The man in the diver's wetsuit signaled agreement and angled cautiously down the slope in bare feet, carrying flippers and a face mask in one hand and a tank harness in the other. The sheriff's deputy waved the last two cars of the convoy onward, and after they had passed, the driver of the heavy equipment towtruck maneuvered his vehicle into a position on the pavement that was perpendicular to the shoreline below. Beside the third of the parked vehicles stood two solemn, foreign-looking men in black business suits, one of them middle-aged and one of them considerably older. As the man in diving dress jumped into the water, the older man made an impatient gesture and began an awkward, zig-zag course down the slope toward the shore.

That was the last glimpse I had for an interval of what R. J. called the "fishing expedition" because in the next moment he and I in the company of the county sheriff were shown by a sullenly handsome younger man into the foyer of the Davis house and from there into a spacious front sitting room lined with books and display cases.

"You'll have to join the party, Mr. Macmillan," R. J. said to him. "At least for a while."

As we entered the room, we could observe Byron L. Davis, our involuntary host, standing near a distant casement window with his arms folded, staring out over a terrace at the activity farther down the shore. He turned reluctantly as we approached and said, "Good morning. Only I sense that the morning is far from good." He singled R. J. out with his look. "You appear to have decided that Václav made it nearly to our door. How terribly strange."

"I think it might be even stranger than that, Mr. Davis," R. J. said. "I'm sort of hoping you and Mr. Macmillan can help us decide how much of it is really strange and how much of it isn't." He put his hand on my arm and said, "This is my wife, by the way. Ginny Carr, who helps me out sometimes when I'm stumped, and I understand that you've already met Sheriff Bonner."

"I'm pleased," Davis said to me with an displeased face and held out a limp hand, following the performance of which duty he invited us to sit in a nearby group of sofas and chairs. A short period of quiet ensued before he cleared his throat. "What . . . or rather, I'm at a loss, Sheriff Bonner, and Mr. Carr, as to what information you are seeking."

All at once a metallic whining noise reached our ears through the row of open casements, and we turned as a group to look in that direction. I rose to my feet, saying, "I'm the least necessary person to this conversation, I'm sure, so I think perhaps . . ." Without finishing the sentence except with a nod I moved quickly across to the windows and looked out.

"Nothing yet," I reported disingenuously to the group, since I could see quite clearly that a long, heavy cable was unwinding from the rear of the towtruck, then down the slope and into the lake, and that the two men in black suits were now standing together on what appeared to be the very verge of the shoreline, leaning out intently over the water.

"Good," I heard R. J. say. "Because I'd rather get this settled ahead of any developments."

Developments, however, appeared to be coming on rather quickly. As I stood at the window watching, the diver surfaced from the depths, removed his breathing apparatus, and gave a shout, whereupon, in an incident of disturbing irony, one of the two men along the verge, the older one, overbalanced and fell into the lake.

Behind me R. J.'s steady voice was saying, "... so let me put it to you this way, Mr. Davis and Mr. Macmillan: provided that the body of Václav Hucek is found down below, can you suggest any reason why his cause of death might be something other than drowning?"

As for drowning, the unlucky gentleman who had lost his footing seemed to be a capable swimmer in spite of his age, and he was quickly helped back onto the land in his dripping suitcoat and pants by his companion.

"I—can't imagine anything," said Byron Davis in answer to my husband's question. "Can you, Clive?"

"Yes, I can," the young man responded in a guarded tone.

In the meantime, after removing

his tank harness, the diver boosted himself out of the water as I continued to watch, then stood and waved broadly with both his arms toward the rear of the towtruck. At the sound of a noisy meshing of gears the cable grew taut, and then came the further sound of the truck's engine laboring heavily, too heavily for me to pretend to ignore.

"They've hooked onto something," I said, peering behind me.

Byron Davis, I saw, was on his feet, rubbing his hands together and looking distressed. "Poor Václav," he said. "Poor Václav. I've had such awful visions . . ." His eyes roamed from me to Clive Macmillan to the glass-enclosed violin near where R. J. sat.

"Clive," he said in a tone meant to be commanding but that sounded merely willful and shrill, "Clive—be very, very careful in what you say."

"I intend to, Byron. I do intend to."

"The car is breaking the water," I reported. "And . . . now it's . . . coming up on the land."

There was a rush to join me at the windows on the parts of the sheriff and Clive Macmillan, but Byron Davis held back, and for that reason, no doubt, so did R. J.

The drama by the lake, meanwhile, played itself out in a scene of stark inevitability. As the wind whipped in gusts and the threatening sky seemed to grow yet darker and more ominous, the small, mud-encrusted vehicle, shedding water from every seam, rose onto the shore, slewing sideways, and came to a precarious halt on the

slope, held in position by the tow-line.

Men approached from several directions, and one of them, after trying the driver's door without success, applied a heavy crowbar to it near the handle. The door sprang open as we watched, releasing a small flood of water, and we knew from the way he shied back, that the remains of Václav Hucek must be strapped inside on the seat.

"Clive," said Byron Davis's voice from behind us. "Please allow me to explain."

"... at eight o'clock I reported my fears for Václav's safety to your office, sheriff, and then sat here in this room with Clive, waiting and wondering and—and trying to find solace." A look bordering on defiance passed briefly across his face. "I regarded Václav Hucek as my friend. I was weeping. And Clive was... holding me as I wept.

"When suddenly... when suddenly we heard a loud banging at one of the casements. A face peered in at us—and it was Václav's face! He'd taken all that time to drive forty-five miles and then had climbed up the icy steps—such a stubborn, stubborn man—and had come for some reason of his own to the windows on the terrace instead of the door.

"We rushed, of course, to bring him in, and it was apparent to us immediately that he was not merely exhausted but suffering from some affliction. His face had a horrible cast to it, and he seemed almost to lurch as he walked. But rather than..." Davis passed a

hand over his forehead and then stared away, as if he were in a trance. "Rather than allowing us to help him, he pulled himself into this room and... stood there, near that table. I can see him now, standing there, his face almost blood red and yet pallid somehow, standing there screaming at us, berating us for our... our presumed behavior. He called me a name which I refuse to repeat and will not tolerate, and I—I stepped forward and slapped him across the face. Involuntarily. Not hard—was it, Clive?—not hard, but he, Václav... his eyes rolled up, and he let out a horrible cry. Then he fell against the table and slipped to the floor.

"We tried to assist him. How we tried! Clive knows a great deal about CPR methods, and we labored, both together, pressing his chest, applying mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

"But he was dead from the moment he fell. My friend Václav was dead.

"And in that moment I panicked. I had slapped him in senseless anger, and he had toppled like a felled tree. What we did then—Clive unwillingly but out of friendship—was the result of my panic, and I am solely at fault. But once done—once we sent Václav's little car down the slope and into the water—there was no going back because—do you understand?—because no matter how much we wanted to, we could never bring him again among the living.

"And so—we waited instead for this inevitable day. I see him sometimes. Did I tell you that? Out of the

corner of my eye, I see him, but then when I turn to look he isn't there." Davis drew a deep breath and made an effort to compose himself. "You will find, sheriff, that Václav died of a seizure of some kind, I'm sure—a heart attack or a stroke. I am completely ashamed of my behavior—but I did not kill him."

I had remained by the window, looking out from time to time at both the grim activities along the shore of the lake and also at the continued darkening of the troubled sky. But as Byron Davis came gradually to this emphatic conclusion to his revelations, I returned to the sofa and sat beside my husband. We exchanged a brief glance; then I ventured to speak.

"Mr. Davis," I said, beginning tentatively. "Before R. J. or Sheriff Bonner responds to what you've said, I—that is, could I broach a rather different subject?" Without waiting for a reply I continued, "As a good friend of Václav Hucek, you were aware, I'm sure, of the sense of communion he felt for the music and personality of Niccolò Paganini. My question, simply put, is this: did he ever break his reticence on that subject with you? Regarding its source?"

"Is . . . this a . . . relevant question?" Davis spoke slowly but in a rising, querulous tone. "Sheriff, why are you being so silent?"

Sheriff Bonner was a lean, reticent man with a mild voice. He said, "Why—I'm interested in hearing your answer, Mr. Davis."

"Then—" Davis looked across at the table with, momentarily, a doomed expression in his eyes.

"Then I don't know a thing about it. Paganini was tall and slim; Václav was short and fat. Paganini was a notorious libertine; Václav was a paragon of conventional respectability. It was a preposterous pose on Václav's part that no one took seriously but himself. I—"

He came to a sudden halt, doubtless because R. J. had risen to his feet and turned to peer down at the violin in the glass case. "That is a beautiful instrument, Mr. Davis," he said. "My wife's rather a fancier of violins. Would you mind if she took a look at it?"

The air within the room seemed to become completely still, although above the sound of the rushing wind outside I thought I could hear the rumble of distant thunder.

"Sheriff," Davis said after a moment. "I . . . I don't understand what Mr. and Mrs. Carr are about. Not at all. Can't we simply come to the point between us, you and I? Caution me, condemn me, arrest me if you must, but—"

"I don't have any plans to arrest you, Mr. Davis," said the sheriff quietly. "Not so far. But I like Mr. Carr's suggestion—and I do have a search warrant here that I'd rather not use."

Davis stood then and moved with reluctant steps across to the glass case. "This is a purported Amati from 1693 which I have owned since 1987," he said in a forced, even voice as he unlocked the case. "Please—handle it with care." He brought the instrument to me and lowered it into my hands with an air of hostile caution. I, who had never so much as held a violin until the previous

week, took it from him and pretended to an expertise I did not have. I examined the rich sheen of the ancient wood, both front and back, tucked it briefly under my chin and plucked a string or two, sighted along the top surface, tested the gloss of the finish with my finger.

"Surely this is no Amati, Mr. Davis," I said. And in the interval that followed I did hear thunder.

I held the instrument up to my eyes to peer in through the sound-holes, then lowered it and gave a deliberate sigh. "But of course the maker's label is missing, as they often are, and so—"

R. J., meanwhile, had remained by the open glass case, looking at and then turning pages in the Bible on display. "Here's a label, Ginny," he said innocently. "'Giuseppe Guarneri, IHS.' With a cross."

Davis wrenched his gaze from me to my husband in a gesture of helpless fury, and in that moment, as if all the powers at hand were conspiring against him, there came a much louder rumbling of thunder followed closely by a sharp rapping at one of the casements. The thunder boomed again even as I turned with the others to look out at the dark and lowering sky and the equally dark and ominous figure framed there in the window, the figure of an old man dressed in black, peering into the room with a fiery anger in his eyes. He was a foreign-looking man, short and burly of build, with disheveled, damp hair and dirt smeared across his forehead. The severe black suit he wore clung to him in an extreme

wetness, and in one hand he held up a violin—or what had once been a violin before five months submerged in freezing depths had destroyed its finish and warped it until it had split apart.

"Václav?" said Davis suddenly, in a horrified tone. "No!"

"Hvere-iss-da-Guar-ne-ri-us?" shouted the man through the casement.

And as a heavy peal of thunder shook the house, Byron L. Davis collapsed on the carpet at my feet.

"... because, you see, Peter," I was saying to my uncle that evening, "perhaps the most famous violin in all musical history isn't a Stradivarius but the Guarneri played by Niccolò Paganini and made by the famed "Giuseppe del Jesu," who labeled his instruments with his name followed by IHS and a cross, the IHS being the first three letters in Greek for the name Jesus.

"It does seem strange, at least to me, that a violin dedicated in such a way to holiness could have been the favored instrument of a man like Paganini, who traded on his reputation for demonic musical powers, but—" I made a gesture of incomprehension.

"And so what is it you're saying, Ginny Girl? That old Hucek's mysterious thing about Paganini was just that he'd swiped a fiddle made by this fella Guarneri?"

"No—because it's far more complex than that. You have to understand, first of all, that he'd had the use of the violin for much of his career prior to his defection, and he

sincerely believed that his playing had at least earned him the right to it for his remaining lifetime. I suspect also that he felt, as Paganini had, that he drew supernatural power from Giuseppe Guarneri's craftsmanship, but he attributed that power to a holy rather than a diabolical source.

"And as far as mere physical ownership is concerned, who really owns the violin now, Peter? Václav's brother Karl? The Czech people—no longer under a socialist government? The previous owner from whom the violin was confiscated?"

"I guess I know who doesn't own it," Peter remarked.

"Byron Davis?" said R. J. from beside me. "He owns a water-soaked, dubious Amati and more luck than he probably realizes. I don't think there's a chance in the world he'll be prosecuted for theft, provided the autopsy confirms that Hucek's death was natural, and I think it will. I think up to the very last point Davis was telling us the truth about what happened that night—not necessarily about the hugs and consolation part, but that's his own business and it doesn't really matter. The big thing is this: after we brought him around and he offered to make amends by paying restitution to cover the cost of all the man-hours and equipment-hours spent searching for Hucek, I could see the sheriff backing off from any interest he might have had in criminal charges and considering a consent decree instead."

"But what about the twin brother?"

"When I put the Guarneri into his

hands, Peter," I said, "he was rather like a person in ecstasy. That was all he cared about after the shock of losing Václav: that the violin, at least, had survived. He'd helped his brother smuggle it out of the country, and he was very well aware of its value and importance. What he intends to do with it, of course, isn't altogether clear at this point, but it will be something far better, I'm sure, than shamefully gloating over its secret possession the way Byron Davis was doing, displaying it in plain view as something else with the maker's label removed and hidden, half cleverly, in the same case."

"Uh-huh. Only, you know what? You never did tell me how you and R. J. figured out about the violin and the label in the first place."

R. J. and I looked at each other. "Well—" I said.

"Well, what?"

R. J. shrugged. "In a way it actually starts off with you, Peter, that's all—since you're the one who hooked me up with the Huceks. If I ever get around to writing the *Carr Detective Handbook*, I'm going to make Axiom Number Three the fact that clients almost always lie to detectives—mostly by leaving out parts of the truth."

"You mean that that couple of innocents—"

"Well, yeah, Peter—that couple of innocents. It struck me right off the bat, you see, that ten thousand dollars didn't make a lot of sense as a fee for what they wanted me to do unless there was some additional incentive that they weren't talking about. So even though the violin was never mentioned, I was looking for

something like it from the very beginning. And as it turned out, facts and inferences I picked up along the way pointed very strongly to its existence. Václav's obsession with Paganini was a big one, of course, and the rumor of his bringing state-owned instruments with him when he defected, and the other obsession he had after his wife died of always carrying his violin around . . ." R. J. shrugged again. "It just made a lot more sense to think that my clients wanted me to find Václav's violin as well as his remains even though they didn't say it."

"So we hypothesized," I continued, "that the violin might be a virtually priceless Guarneri and that Byron Davis might have it unlawfully in his possession."

"Which meant by extension," R. J. said, "that the reason Václav and his car hadn't been found might simply be because they were submerged all winter in the deep pool of Mansion Lake under three feet of ice. Ginny was the one who read up on violins and spotted the business

about the labels, especially Giuseppe Guarneri's labels—"

"And so we, or really R. J., went looking for the label removed from the instrument, because it seemed likely that Davis, if he did have the violin, wouldn't want to advertise the fact."

"When we found the label, which was pretty valuable in itself, we knew that Hucek had made it to Davis's place the night of the storm, which meant that the car with Hucek in it almost had to be in the lake along with a replacement violin, probably the Amati that Davis claimed to own. So the only question left, to my mind, was whether Davis's greed for the much more valuable Guarneri was triggered before or after Hucek died."

"And you really think it was after?"

"Oh, it was after, all right. And I think we did Davis a big service by airing the whole thing. Maybe now he won't think he sees the ghost of Václav Hucek every time he turns around."

Akitada's First Case

I. J. Parker

H EIAN-KYO (KYOTO), ELEVENTH CENTURY JAPAN
SOMETIME DURING POEM-COMPOSING MONTH (AUGUST).

The sun had been up only a few hours but the archives of the ministry were already stifling in the summer heat. A murky, oppressive air hung about the shelves of document boxes and settled across the low desks. These were normally occupied by scribes and junior clerks, but at the moment they were empty.

Akitada, having celebrated his twentieth birthday with friends the night before—an occasion that involved emptying a cup of wine each time one failed to compose an acceptable poem—had overslept and crept in the back way. Now he knelt at his desk, feeling sick and staring blindly at a dossier he was supposed to be copying. He winced when two of his fellow clerks, Hirosawa and Sanekana, walked in chattering loudly.

"Sugawara!" Hirosawa stopped in surprise. "Where did you come from? The minister's been asking for you. I wouldn't give much for your chances of keeping your position this time."

Sanekana, a pimply fat fellow, sniggered. "You should have seen his face," he announced gleefully. "He was positively gloating at the thought of getting rid of you. Better go to him quick!"

Akitada blanched. He could not afford to lose his clerkship in the Ministry of Justice. It had been the only position offered to him when he graduated from the university. If only the minister had not formed such an instant dislike of him! Inexplicably, His Excellency, Soga Ietada, had found fault with everything Akitada had done until he had become too nervous to answer the simplest question. As a result the minister had banished him to the archives to do copy work alongside the scribes. To make matters worse, his fellow clerks had recognized Akitada as a marked man and had quickly disassociated themselves from him. Akitada eyed Sanekana and Hirosawa dubiously. "I don't suppose you would cover for me?" he asked. "I might have stepped outside when you looked for me."

They burst into laughter.

With a sigh, Akitada rose.

His heart was beating wildly and his palms were sweating when he was shown into the great man's office with the painted screens of waterfowl, the lacquered document boxes, and the broad desk of polished cryptomeria wood. On the desk stood the porcelain planter with a perfect miniature maple tree, the bronze brazier with its enameled wine flask, and the ministerial seal carved from pale jade

—all of them witnesses to Akitada's prior humiliations.

The minister was not alone. A thin, elderly man in a neat, dark grey silk robe was kneeling on the cushion before the great man's table. "It is a matter of honor, Excellency, no, of life and death to me," he said, his voice uneven with suppressed emotion. "I have, as I explained, exhausted all other possibilities. Your Excellency is my last hope."

"Nonsense!" barked Soga Ietada. Being stout, he was sitting cross-legged at his ease, tapping impatient fingers on the polished surface of his desk. "You take it too seriously. Young women run away all the time. She'll show up one of these days, presenting you with a grandchild, no doubt."

The old man's back stiffened. He did not glance at Akitada, who hovered, greatly embarrassed, near the door. "You are mistaken," the man said. "My daughter left my home to enter the household of a nobleman. She would never engage in a fleeting, clandestine affair."

Soga raised his eyes to heaven, caught a glimpse of Akitada, and glared, saying coldly to his guest, "As you say. I can only repeat that it is not in my power to assist you. I suggest you seek out this, er, nobleman. Now you must excuse me. My clerk is waiting to consult me on an urgent case."

Akitada's heart skipped a beat. Maybe it was not another reprimand after all. A case? Would he finally be given a case?

The older man bowed and rose. He left quickly, with only a passing glance at Akitada.

When the door closed, the minister's expression changed to one of cold fury.

"And where were you this morning?" he barked.

Akitada fell to his knees and touched his forehead to the floor. "I . . . I was feeling ill," he stuttered. Well, that was the truth at least. His stomach was heaving, and he swallowed hard, waiting for the storm to break over his head.

"No matter!" snapped the minister. "Your work has been unsatisfactory from the start. As you know, you came here on probation. Since you have proved inept at all but copying work and are now far behind in that, you cannot afford the luxury of ill health."

"Yes, Your Excellency. I shall make up the time."

"No."

Akitada looked up and caught a smirk of satisfaction on Soga's face. "I assure your Excellency . . ." he began earnestly.

"I said no!" thundered the minister. "Your time has run out. You may get your property and leave the ministry this instant." He slapped a pudgy hand on the document before him. "I have already drawn up the papers of dismissal, and they spell out your gross inadequacies in detail."

"But . . ." Akitada sought frantically for some promise, some explanation that might sway the minister's mind, at least postpone his dismissal. "Your Excellency," he pleaded, "you may recall that I earned my position by placing first in the university examinations. Perhaps if I had been given some

legal work, I might have proved satis . . . ”

“How dare you criticize my decisions?” cried the minister. “It is a typical example of your poor judgment. I shall add a further adverse comment to my evaluation of your performance.”

Akitada bowed wordlessly and left the room. He went straight to his desk, ignoring the curious eyes and whispers of Sanekana and Hirosawa, and gathered his things. These consisted of some writing implements and a few law books and were easily wrapped into a square of cloth, knotted, and tossed over one shoulder. Then he left the ministry.

Suffering under the humiliation of his dismissal, he did not pause to consider the full disaster, the fact that he would no longer draw the small salary which had kept rice in the family bowls and one servant in the house to look after his widowed mother and two younger sisters, until he had passed out of the gate of the Imperial City.

Then the thought of facing his mother with the news made his knees turn to water, and he stopped outside the gate. Lady Sugawara was forever reminding him of a son's duty to his family and complaining about his inadequate salary and low rank. What would she say now?

Before him, Suzaku Avenue stretched into the distance. Long, wide, and willow-lined, it bisected the capital to become the great southern highway to Kyushu—and the world beyond.

He longed to keep walking, away

from his present life, with his bundle of books and brushes. Somewhere someone must be in need of a young man filled with the knowledge of the law and a thirst for justice.

But he knew it was impossible. All appointments were in the hands of the central government, and besides, he could not desert his family. A son's first duty was to his parent. He despaired of finding a clerkship in another bureau. If only there were someone, some man of rank, who would put in a good word for him, but Akitada was without helpful relatives or patrons of that sort.

He sat down on the steps of the gate and put his head in his hands.

“Young man? Are you ill?”

Akitada glanced up. An elderly gentleman in a formal robe and hat regarded him with kindly interest. Belatedly recognition came. This was the man who had just been turned away by Soga, a fellow sufferer. Akitada rose and bowed.

“Are you not the young fellow who came in while I was with the minister?” the man asked.

“Yes.” Akitada recalled the embarrassing subject under discussion and blushed. “I am very sorry, but I had been sent for.”

“I know. But I thought you had an urgent case to talk over with the minister?”

Akitada blushed again. “I have been dismissed,” he said.

“Oh.”

A brief silence fell. Then the older man said sympathetically, “Well, it looks like we've both been dismissed. You look pretty low.” He

paused, studying Akitada thoughtfully, then added, "Maybe we can be of assistance to each other."

"How so?" Akitada asked dubiously.

The gentleman gathered the skirt of his gown and lowered himself to the step next to him.

"I have lost a daughter and need someone to help me find her, someone who knows the law and can quote it to those who keep showing me the door. And you, I bet, could use the experience, not to mention a weekly salary and a generous reward?"

Akitada looked at the gentleman as the answer to a prayer. "I am completely at your service, sir," he said with fervent gratitude. "Sugawara Akitada is my name, by the way."

"Good. I am Okamoto Toson."

"Not the master of the imperial wrestling office?"

The modest man in the grey robe smiled ruefully. "The same. Let's go to my house."

Okamoto Toson lived in a small house that stood, surrounded by a garden, in a quiet residential street not far from the palace. He was a widower with two daughters. It was the younger who had disappeared so mysteriously.

Okamoto took him to a room that was, like the rest of the house, small, pleasant, and unpretentious. Yet Okamoto was known to be wealthy, and he was well respected by the nobility and the commoners alike. He was a man of the people who had been drawn into the world of the great due to his

knowledge of wrestling and his managerial ability.

The walls were covered with scrolls showing the rankings of wrestling champions, but one scroll was a painting of a court match with nobles seated around a circle where two massive fighters in loincloths strove against one another. The emperor himself had attended and was enthroned under a special tent. Over towards one side of the picture, the artist had depicted the small figure of Okamoto himself.

Akitada wondered why the minister had dismissed such a man without giving him the slightest encouragement.

Okamoto's story was brief but strange. Recently widowed, he had been left with two young daughters. The older had taken over the running of the household, but the younger, Tomoe, was a dreamer who spent her time reading romantic tales and talking of noble suitors. Being apparently something of a beauty according to her father, whose face softened every time he spoke of her, she had attracted the eyes of a certain nobleman and permitted his secret visits—no doubt after the pattern of the novels she had read—and the man had convinced her to leave with him.

All this had taken place without the father's knowledge, and Okamoto was apologetic. Akitada gathered that the death of his wife had caused him to withdraw from all but court duties, and since his older daughter Otomi had run the household efficiently, he had seen no cause to worry.

It was, in fact, the older daughter

who had reported her sister's elopement with a nameless nobleman.

At this point in the story Okamoto excused himself to get his daughter Otomi. Akitada stared after him in dismay. Either the girl had been incredibly foolish or someone had played a very nasty trick on her. No member of the aristocracy would take a young woman as his official wife or concubine without her father's knowledge.

Okamoto returned with a pale, plain young woman in a house dress. He said, "This is my elder daughter Otomi. Please ask her anything."

Akitada and the young woman bowed to each other. She went to kneel behind her father's cushion, her eyes downcast and her work-reddened hands folded modestly in her lap.

Akitada was unused to speaking to strange young women, but he tried. "Did you know that your sister had a . . . er . . . met someone?"

The young woman shook her head. "My sister did not confide in me. She is a foolish girl. She is always reading stories, and sometimes she makes them up. I did not think anything when she said she had fallen in love with a nobleman."

"You did not share a room?" Akitada asked, puzzled how a lover could have visited Tomoe without her sister's knowledge.

To his dismay Otomi began to weep in harsh, racking sobs. Akitada shot a helpless look at Okamoto.

The older man smiled a little sadly.

"Hush, Otomi," he said, explaining, "The girls did not get along. To-

moe said her sister snored, and Otomi wanted her to stop reading by candlelight."

Otomi sniffled. "I think she just said those things because she wanted to be alone to receive this person. How could she go away with him like that in the middle of the night without a word to anyone! But my father has always allowed her to do whatever she wished."

Okamoto shook his head. "No, Otomi. You exaggerate." Turning to Akitada, he said, "This is really not like Tomoe. No goodbye. Not so much as a letter. I am afraid the poor child has been abducted by a man who has no intention of treating her honorably. That is why we must find her." His short, stubby hands became fists. "This person of rank knew we are only ordinary people without learning, and he thought it would be easy to fool us. You, being a young gentleman yourself, will understand much better than I the person who took my child. What do you think we should do? Please speak frankly. I shall not take offense. My child's life is precious to me."

Akitada hesitated. It crossed his mind that Tomoe had run off with some commoner, perhaps even a rich man's servant. He said awkwardly, "I do not want to worry you more, but I am wondering why the minister dismissed you. You are a highly respected man and have had the honor of addressing His Majesty."

The older man looked uncomfortable. "I was a little surprised myself. Still, I am nobody. It is only my association with wrestling that

brings me in contact with the 'good people.'"

Akitada turned back to the young woman. "I assume you never saw your sister's visitor. But perhaps she described him when she talked about him. Anything, the smallest detail, may help me find him."

She nodded. "Tomoe said he looked exactly like Prince Genji. And that, like Prince Genji, he wore the most ethereal perfumes in his robes. Is there such a man among the great nobles?"

The question struck Akitada as incredibly naive. He blurted out, "Prince Genji is a character in a novel."

"I thought so." Otomi's expression was almost triumphant. She reached into her sleeve and produced a crumpled bit of paper. "There," she said, extending it to Akitada. "She left this behind."

It was a poem, or rather a fragment: "By the pond the frogs sing in the branches of the fallen pine; let the two of us, like a pair of ducks, join their . . ." Either the author had been interrupted or had discarded a draft. But the brushstrokes were elegant; both the calligraphy and style were those of a courtier. Apparently that much of Tomoe's story had been true.

Folding the paper Akitada tucked it into his sleeve. "This may be some help." Okamoto's anxious eyes met his, and he felt great pity for the distraught father. "It is possible that the man was sincere in his feelings for your daughter," he said gently.

Okamoto regarded him fixedly. "He took Tomoe without my permission." When Akitada nodded, he

laughed bitterly. "The poem is just a bit of verse, that's all. The fine gentleman dashed it off at a moment's notice to turn a poor girl's head."

Akitada said helplessly, "Well, I'll make inquiries. Can you describe your daughter to me?"

Okamoto tried, but tears rose to his eyes and Otomi spoke for him. "Tomoe is in her sixteenth year," she said, "but well-grown and tall for her age. She has an oval face, her skin is very white, and her eyes are large. Her hair reaches to her ankles and is very thick. I brush it for her every day." Otomi compressed her lips before continuing. "In front of her left ear she has a small brown mark that looks like a little bug. She hates it and always wears her hair loose so it covers her ears."

She gave Akitada a fierce look. "My sister is very beautiful. She looks nothing like me at all."

Okamoto shivered and wiped the moisture from his eyes. Immediately Otomi rose to get another robe and draped it around his shoulders solicitously. "You are tired, Father," she said. "I shall fetch a brazier of hot coals and some wine."

Embarrassed, Akitada rose, saying, "I am very sorry for your trouble and shall try to help."

Okamoto rose also, leaning on his daughter's arm. "Allow me," he said and pulled a slender, neatly wrapped package from his sleeve. "This is a token of my gratitude for your interest and will defray any immediate expenses."

Akitada accepted with a bow and took his departure, wondering why the girl Otomi looked so complacent,

almost happy, as she stood beside her father.

His first visit was to the headquarters of the municipal police to see if there had been an accident involving a young woman. He was shown to an office where a harassed looking sergeant was bent over paperwork. Akitada sat down and waited.

"Of all the things to happen!" the sergeant muttered to himself. "And the coroner is sick! Heaven only knows if I got this right. No names, he says. How is a man to file a report without names, I ask you."

Akitada leaned forward. "A troublesome case?" he asked.

The sergeant looked up. "Oh. Sorry, sir! Didn't realize you were there." A puzzled frown, then a tentative smile. "Haven't I seen you in the Ministry of Justice?"

Akitada bowed slightly. "Sugawara Akitada," he introduced himself. "Junior clerk."

"Right. Yes, we've got a nameless suicide. And the report was brought in by a nameless citizen." He looked over his shoulder, then leaned forward to whisper, "It's all very hush-hush. Your boss talking to my boss. Actually it was the captain of the palace guard."

"Ah," nodded Akitada. He asked in a whisper, "Masahira or Morikawa?" There was a right guard and a left guard of the palace.

"Masahira," mouthed the sergeant. He continued in a normal tone, "I've been told to file a report without names; just the 'unfortunate female victim' and the 'person who made the discovery.' On top of

that we don't have a coroner's report. All I know is the girl was dead when we pulled her from the water."

A girl! Akitada became alert. "Perhaps," he offered, "I could be of assistance. I am not a coroner, but I had a little forensic medicine when I was a student at the university."

The sergeant was relieved. "If you wouldn't mind taking a look," he said, getting to his feet. "Just a bit of the jargon and I can finish my report. We've got her in the back room."

The back room was a barren space, dim with the shutters closed, and contained nothing but a covered body on a mat. A faint smell of rotted vegetation hung in the air. The sergeant threw open the shutters, then pulled back the straw mat that covered the corpse.

Akitada held his breath. He saw the face first and felt an almost physical pain that someone so young and beautiful should be forever lost to the world. Slender brows arched over eyes shaded by thick lashes, now wet against the pale cheeks. The small nose and softly rounded lips were almost childlike in their freshness and innocence. She looked asleep, and like a sleeping child she touched a hidden desire to cherish and protect.

Too late. The long hair, matted with mud and rank vegetation, stuck to her skin, was tangled in the clammy folds of her fine silk clothes (lovely rose colors shading all the way to the palest blushing skin tone), and reached to her small, slender hands and feet. There was so much hair, so many layers of wet silk that she seemed to be wrapped

in them as in a strange pink and black cocoon.

Akitada approached, feeling strangely reverent, and knelt, his eyes on her face. He saw no marks on her except for a thin red line high on her neck beneath the jaw. It disappeared under her hair. He extended a hand, almost apologetically, and brushed aside a strand that covered her right ear.

There it was, a dainty dark brown mark, no bigger than an orange seed. According to her sister, it had worried her, but Akitada thought it most beautiful, this small imperfection in the otherwise perfect face of the girl Tomoe.

"Oh!" he murmured, overcome with pity and regret. The puzzle had turned into something far more real that touched him deeply.

The thin red line widened and deepened just below the ear but did not continue around her neck. It was recent. Whatever had caused it had not been strangulation, though something might have been put around her neck and then jerked backward.

"What is it?" asked the sergeant. "Anything out of the ordinary?"

She was everything out of the ordinary to Akitada's mind, but he asked, "Did she have anything around her neck?"

"No. Well, was it suicide or what?"

"What makes you think it was suicide?"

"My boss told me it was. He said she left a letter or something before drowning herself."

Akitada sighed. It was too likely that Tomoe had written a tragic love letter. If Masahira was the lover, he

was beyond her reach. He looked at the lovely, silent face before him. A young romantic girl would have found the noble captain irresistible. Masahira was in his late thirties and one of the handsomest men at court. All the empress's ladies in waiting were said to be in love with him. For all that, Masahira had had an excellent reputation up to now. Married to a daughter of the chancellor, he had never been rumored to have affairs or even flirtations. If he was indeed the man, she must have seen him at one of the wrestling contests held in the palace. He would be in attendance, riding at the head of the imperial guard, resplendent in golden armor shining in the sunlight and seated on a prancing steed.

"Well?" urged the sergeant. "Shouldn't you take off her clothes?"

Akitada recoiled from the suggestion. Instead he gently opened her lips and felt inside. He pulled out a fragment of a water plant and some wet dirt. "She drowned," he told the sergeant. "The fact that she swallowed water mixed with vegetation and pond mud proves that she was alive when she fell in."

"Ah," nodded the sergeant. "I shall put it in my report."

Akitada turned her head and felt the skull, moving the wet hair aside from the skin. On her left temple he found a bruise, slightly swollen and discolored. Her hair had become glued to the scalp and as he pulled it loose the tips of his fingers came away red.

The sergeant peered. "Must've banged her head when she went in."

Akitada looked up. "Not if she

committed suicide. She would have walked into the water. Unless she jumped from a high place and hit some obstruction. Where was she found?"

"She didn't jump. It was just a murky garden pond full of frogs."

Frogs! Akitada was momentarily distracted by the memory of the poem. He asked, "Was the water deep?"

"No. It only came to my hips."

Akitada looked at the sergeant. "Would you drown yourself in that? Where was this place?"

"Small villa in the western part. You know how things are over there. It's pretty much deserted. She was staying by herself. Not even a servant. If you ask me, it was your typical love nest."

"Whose house?"

The sergeant cast up his eyes and grinned. "Ah! Your guess is as good as mine. The chief says it's immaterial. She committed suicide. Case closed."

"But what about her family?"

"We'll post a notice. If anybody missed her, they can claim the body." The sergeant looked worried suddenly. "It is suicide, isn't it? Or ... an accident?"

"You mean, could she have run into something with her head and fallen in the water? I don't know. You'll have to show me the place."

The sergeant frowned. "Aren't you going to look at the rest of her?"

Reluctantly Akitada checked the small hands, the dainty feet in their white silk socks. Both were unmarked except by muddy water. Then he straightened her clothes gingerly. The dampness made the

silk cling to her skin, outlining high, small breasts, a narrow waist, and delicately rounded hips and thighs. In spite of himself Akitada felt the blood rise warmly to his face and looked away in self-disgust. Turning the body on its side, he found a long tear in the back of the outer gown. A sharp, thorny branch was caught in the hem, and the silk showed streaks of dirt and many small rips. "Did you or the constables drag the body on the ground?" he asked the sergeant.

"No. Two of us scooped her out of the water and laid her on the mat she's on now. She weighed very little, even with all the water."

Akitada gently laid Tomoe on her back again, plucking at the layers of silk until she looked more decently covered. Then he rose.

"I am afraid, sergeant, this young person was murdered."

The sergeant turned first red, then white. "No," he said urgently. "I can't put that in my report. I don't care what you think you saw, it can't be murder. The chief said *suicide*."

Akitada shook his head. "It's murder," he said stubbornly. "She was knocked unconscious and then dragged to the water and drowned. Now let us go to this villa and see what we can find out."

The sergeant looked panic-stricken. "Are you mad? You shouldn't even be here. Come on." Taking Akitada's arm, he pulled him out of the room and locked the door after them.

"Now," he said as they were standing outside, "you'd better go home and forget all about this."

Akitada gave him a long look.

"As you wish," he said and walked away. The sergeant stood and watched him turn the corner, wondering belatedly what Akitada's business had been.

Lord Masahira occupied his family mansion on the corner of Kitsuji and Nishidoin avenues. It was a large, generously staffed establishment, and Akitada had considerable difficulty being admitted. The man he was about to meet was a favorite with the emperor and related by marriage to the chancellor. That gave him the sort of power that would make even Soga grovel. No wonder the minister had dismissed Okamoto without the slightest encouragement. No wonder he'd used his influence to keep Masahira's name out of the investigation. They were covering up a murder.

Akitada saw again the still face of the dead girl and the pain in her father's eyes, and a hot anger against Masahira filled his heart. He had known at the police station that he could not tell Okamoto of his daughter's murder without at least identifying her killer first. And Masahira was the most likely choice.

The handsome captain of the imperial guard was in a small garden enclosed by the walls of several buildings. He was sitting on the edge of the wooden verandah and had Akitada's visiting card in his hand. Glancing up, he said, "You are Sugawara from the Ministry of Justice?"

Akitada bowed deeply. He knew he was in the presence of one of the first nobles of the land but was

much too angry to prostrate himself. Considering the collusion between this man and the minister, he also did not feel obligated to go into long explanations of his status.

When he raised his head, he saw to his surprise that the man before him had red-rimmed eyes and looked as if he had not slept. Beside him, on the polished boards, stood an untouched tray of food.

"Well? What does Soga want?" Masahira asked curtly.

If the minister found out about this visit, he would see to it that Akitada never worked again in any imperial office. On the other hand, Masahira's question proved that he had recently consulted Soga about Tomoe's murder. Righteous disgust gave Akitada the strength to continue.

"I am here on behalf of Okamoto Toson," he corrected Masahira. "He has asked for my unofficial assistance in locating his daughter Tomoe. Perhaps I should explain first that I have just come from police headquarters where I have seen the body of his unfortunate child."

A slight flush appeared on Masahira's pale face. "I see," he said tonelessly. "Well? I was under the impression that the matter was being handled by Soga. Is it money the old man wants? How much? Come on! Let's get it over with!"

Akitada stiffened, remembering the grief and worry of Okamoto. "It is not a matter of money, and the young woman's father is not yet aware that she is dead," he said coldly.

"Oh?" Masahira waited.

Heavens, did the man think this

was a blackmail attempt? Akitada flushed with anger. "I shall of course report to him," he said quickly, "but I came to you first because I hoped that you might wish to see him yourself to explain what happened."

Masahira turned away. "No. You may tell Okamoto that I am responsible for what happened and that my life means nothing to me now. I am at his disposal if he desires to discuss the affair or avenge his honor."

Akitada was thunderstruck. He had expected fury, denial, bluster, certainly not this quick admission of guilt. He looked at the back of the man and wavered in his estimation. The broad shoulders sagged and his neck, bent, looked vulnerable for all its strong muscles and neatly brushed, glossy black hair. But he could not afford to feel sympathy. Masahira was, at the very least, a sly seducer of innocent young women, at worst a heartless killer.

"I am afraid it is not going to be that simple," he said, "not in a case of murder."

Masahira spun around. "What? Murder? She drowned herself. Because she thought I'd deserted her."

"No. Someone knocked her unconscious, dragged her to the pond, and drowned her." Akitada outlined his observations of the evidence.

Masahira ran his hands through his hair. "It cannot be. Here?" He fished a piece of paper from inside his robe. "Read for yourself."

The letter was still warm from lying next to Masahira's skin. Akitada unfolded it and read the child-like characters. "I cannot bear this

lonely place any longer. I think you do not want me and will leave me to die alone. How could I ever have believed you! My sleeves are wet with tears. Soon they will be wetter still."

"Tomoe wrote this?" Akitada asked, returning it.

Masahira nodded. "I blame myself entirely. I should not have left her alone there. She told me she was frightened and begged me to stay. When I refused . . ." He turned away.

"You could have taken her back to her father," Akitada offered, his anger melting rapidly along with his suspicions.

"You don't understand." Masahira's voice broke. "I loved her." He put both hands over his face. "I could not bear to give her up."

"Then why did you not bring her here and legitimize the relationship," Akitada asked. "A man in your position is expected to have secondary wives."

Masahira turned and looked at him bleakly from moist eyes. "I meant to. In fact, I was preparing my household to receive her when it happened," he said stiffly.

Akitada digested this information and decided to accept it. "Regardless of the letter, which is ambiguous at best, someone killed her," he said at last.

Before Masahira could respond, the door opened and a tall, handsome woman entered. Her robes were costly, and her glossy black hair swept the floor behind her, but her features were thin and pinched. Lady Chujo, Masahira's wife and the chancellor's oldest daughter.

When she saw Akitada, she gave him a sharp, appraising look before addressing her husband.

"I apologize if I am interrupting, husband," she said in the soft, nasal tones of the upper classes. "I wished to know if there is any news."

"My wife," introduced Masahira. "My dear, this is Sugawara Akitada. He has come from Okamoto Town about Tomoe." To Akitada he said, "My wife is aware of the tragedy, but not, of course, of the fact that murder is suspected."

"Murder?" Lady Chujo's eyes flicked over Akitada without interest. "Impossible. My husband found the letter the unfortunate young woman wrote before walking into the pond. Her father must be distraught. It is only natural. But you must convince him that he is wrong about this and that it is absolutely essential the unpleasantness be handled discreetly. Naturally you will also give him our condolences."

Akitada took an instant dislike to her. An unpleasantness, was it? To be resolved by a message of condolence? Aloud he said, "Madam, Tomoe's father is not yet aware of her death nor of her connection with your husband. I came here because explanations had better come from Lord Masahira."

The proud head came up, and the lady stared Akitada in the eye.

"Impossible," she said again. "A man in my husband's position cannot be expected to deal with such low-bred notions. The girl was a foolish child frightened by hobgoblins and fox spirits. I'm certain the proper authorities will rule her death suicide."

Masahira interrupted at this point.

"Did you say Okamoto did not know she went with me? But Tomoe wrote a letter before we left."

A letter? Here was another puzzle. Of course there was only her sister's word for the fact that Tomoe had left without notice. What if Otomi had known all along where Tomoe was?

Aloud he said, "He did not—does not know. He only suspects that Tomoe was lured away by a man of high rank. It was the sergeant at the police building who told me you had reported her death."

Lady Chujo said irritably, "They should make certain such people can be trusted not to blab confidential matters to every curiosity seeker." She glared at Akitada, who was once again reminded of his own precarious position. A word from Lady Chujo to her father and Akitada could find himself banished to the island of exiles in the far north.

He bowed and said apologetically, "Forgive me, but I was merely carrying out Mr. Okamoto's instructions." With brilliant inspiration, he added, "He is very distraught. No doubt the tragedy, when it becomes generally known, will win him much sympathy from his many friends and supporters."

Lady Chujo looked thoughtful, and her husband said quickly, "Yes, of course. I had better go and explain. Though I still don't understand how he could have been completely in the dark. I made no secret of my intentions to Tomoe. It is unfortunate that the empty villa frightened her, but I thought that

the young women would arrange for someone to stay with her."

The young women? So Otomi *had* known!

"Indeed," cried Lady Chujo. "My husband was making even more generous arrangements for her, when she panicked. He was bringing her here. But being a most superstitious person—one of those who are forever muttering spells and buying silly amulets against Heaven knows what—she simply went mad with fright." Lady Chujo was warming to her subject. "If she did not drown herself, then she ran into the water out of fear. It was an accident. It is really no one's fault but the silly girl's."

Masahira said unhappily, "Don't! Tomoe was not silly. She was very sweet and very young. I should have looked after her better."

Lady Chujo bit her lip. She was clearly tired of the subject. Her eyes fell on the tray of food. "You have not eaten," she cried. "Let me get some hot food. This dreadful incident will make you ill, and you know you are on duty tomorrow for the emperor's birthday."

"I am not hungry," Masahira said with a grimace, but she picked up the tray anyway. She left the room, scented robes and long hair trailing, without so much as a nod to Akitada.

"I do not wish to trouble you any longer, sir," said Akitada nervously, "but could you direct me to your villa?"

Masahira sighed and rose. "Come on. I will take you myself. If you are right about its being murder, it would be a terrible thing, but at

least I would not feel that Tomoe killed herself because of me."

Akitada had not expected the offer or the sentiment from such a powerful man and was surprised again.

They rode—Masahira had superb horses—and crossed the city quickly. In the western district they entered an almost rural setting. There were few villas and some, now abandoned, had become overgrown with vegetation. Empty lots were covered with tall meadow grass alive with rabbits and deer. They passed a few small temples, their steep pagodas rising above the trees, but the streets were mere dirt tracks and the bridges, which crossed small rivers and canals, were dilapidated.

Yet here and there, in the midst of the desolation, a few secluded mansions and villas survived, their rustic fencing in good repair and the thatched roofs mended. Masahira stopped at one of these, dismounted, and unlatched the gate.

At that moment a curious figure detached itself from the shadows of the large willow tree at the street corner and walked towards them.

At first glance the scrawny man appeared to be a monk dressed in a stained and worn saffron robe, his head shaven and the wooden begging bowl, dangling from the hemp rope about his skinny middle, bouncing with every shuffling step. When he reached them, he stopped and stared slack-jawed and with vacant eyes. Akitada saw that he wore several small wooden tablets with crude inscriptions around his neck.

"He's just a mendicant," said Ma-

sahira. "They live in small temples around here." He tossed a few copper coins to the man while Akitada rode into the courtyard. Dismounting, he glanced over his shoulder at the beggar, who had not picked up the money but was still standing, staring foolishly after them until Masahira closed the gate.

They stood in a small courtyard of a charming house in the old style, all darkened wood and sweeping thatched roof.

Akitada looked curiously about him. A stone path led to the front door and continued around the side of the house to what must be the garden. The cicadas were singing their high-pitched song in the trees.

Inside there was only one large room, but this had been furnished luxuriously with screens, thick mats, silk bedding, and lacquered clothes chests. There was also an assortment of amusements suitable for an aristocratic young lady. A zither lay next to a beautiful set of writing implements, games rested beside several novels and picture books, and a set of cosmetics and combs accompanied an elegant silver mirror. Three tall wooden racks were draped with gowns of silk and brocade in the most elegant shades and detailing, and Akitada counted no fewer than five fans scattered about. In the short time since she had left her father's house Tomoe had been spoiled by her noble lover. He looked around for evidence of the sister's having been here but found nothing.

Masahira wandered dazedly about the room, touching things. He brushed a hand over one of the

gowns, then picked up a fan, looked at it, and let it drop again. "Well?" he asked.

"I understand that you could not spend much time with Tomoe," said Akitada, "but I have been wondering why she did not have at least a servant for companion?"

"There was a need for secrecy at first. I wished to keep the affair from my household. Tomoe herself insisted that she needed no one. But as I said, I thought surely her sister—" he passed a hand over his face "—at any event, she became fearful. The foxes make strange sounds at night. She was not used to it. She developed a fear that I might meet with an accident and never return. She had dreadful dreams. One day I found her nearly incoherent. That was when I decided to bring her into my home." He sighed deeply. "Too late."

Akitada looked around the room distractedly. This had been the second reference Masahira had made to the sister. Had Otomi known of this place? If so, why had she lied? In his mind's eye he saw again the complacent look on the plain girl's face as she stood beside her father and said, "My sister is very beautiful."

He became aware of the fact that Masahira was looking at him and said quickly, "May I see the pond now? And perhaps you could tell me how you came to find her body."

Masahira nodded. He led the way into the garden. They followed stepping stones through dense shrubbery, but trees and weeds had grown up around the path and brushed and tore at their clothes.

All around them the cicadas' sound pulsed, pausing as they passed and resuming again.

"I went home to speak to my wife," continued Masahira, holding a branch aside for Akitada. "To my surprise, she was immediately receptive to the idea. You must understand that I have no other women, and my wife is childless. She confessed that she looked forward to raising my children by Tomoe and to having her companionship. Overjoyed, I rushed back to tell Tomoe." He fell abruptly silent.

The stepping stones only went as far as a stone lantern. Here Masahira turned right. "The pond is this way," he said. His voice shook a little. In a distance Akitada could hear frogs croaking. There was no sign of foxes, but the dense shrubbery rustled with animal life.

They emerged from the trees. The pond lay before them, basking in the hot sun.

"When I got to the house, it was empty," Masahira said, staring at the still water with a shiver. "I was puzzled, for I knew Tomoe was afraid of the garden, but eventually I went to search for her there. I almost turned around when I got to the pond without seeing her."

The pond was shaped like a gourd and they were standing near its widest end. Up ahead where it narrowed, a small bridge arched across a dense growth of water lilies and lotus. Clouds of small gnats hung low over the water, and dragonflies skimmed the surface. The sound of the cicadas was less strident here, but the atmosphere of the pond, stagnant in the summer heat and

choked with vegetation, embraced them like a suffocating shroud.

Masahira pointed to a thorny shrub near the path. "I saw a small piece of silk there and knew she had come this way. That was when I went to look in the water." He walked forward to the muddy edge and stared down. "She was here."

Akitada joined him. The water was brown but not deep. He could see the muddy bottom, pitted here and there by the feet of the sergeant and his constable. A huge silver carp appeared, rose briefly to look at them, and sank again. Other fish, fat, their colors dull grey and copper in the muddy water, shifted lazily across the mud, and a large frog, suddenly conscious of their presence, jumped in with a splash and swam away. In this neglected garden human beings were the intruders.

Masahira said, "She could have slipped and fallen. But I cannot imagine what would have brought her out here."

Akitada glanced across to where a fallen pine projected over the water. "There are the foxes," he said.

Two young cubs had climbed up and looked at them curiously. Masahira cursed, clapping his hands sharply. The cubs yelped and ran. A moment later their mother appeared, a handsome vixen with a long bushy tail, her ears pointed and her sharp nose twitching to catch their scent.

Masahira clapped again, but the fox stood her ground. "They behave as if they owned this place," he complained. "I shall have workmen clean up this wilderness and drain the

pond." He turned abruptly and walked back.

Akitada stayed another moment, looking at the fox. Then he also turned to go.

What had happened here? He no longer suspected Masahira. It was clear that he had loved the girl and had made arrangements to bring her into his family. Who then? The envious sister? A jealous lover? Or a stranger, some vagrant coming across the lonely girl? The image of the scarecrow monk flashed into his mind, and he hurried after Masahira.

He caught up with him in the house. "That beggar outside the gate, do you know him?"

Masahira looked surprised. "Yes. He is one of the monks in a small temple a short distance away. Why do you ask?"

Akitada, with the certainty of conviction, said, "He looked deranged. I think he got in and attacked Tomoe." Masahira shook his head, but Akitada added quickly, "Perhaps she caught him stealing. He could have picked up something and knocked her out." Looking around the room, he pounced on an iron candlestick, examined it and put it back, disappointed. Next he picked up the heavy silver mirror. "Yes," he cried. "I see a dent here and . . ." He dashed out into the sunlight with it, squinting at the rim.

"There!" he shouted triumphantly. "Do you see it? That is a bit of blood and a long hair is stuck to it. This was used to knock her out. Now do you believe me?"

Masahira came to look and nodded. "Yes," he said sadly. "You must

be right, but the man has always been quite gentle. He has never hurt a living thing. He is not very bright and sells talismans that the other monks inscribe with spells against demons."

"Of course," cried Akitada. "Fox magic. He knocked at the door, and when Tomoe opened it, he offered her one of his charms. I suppose they are those wooden tablets he had around his neck. Then he saw all these fine things and no one to watch them but a young, delicate lady. He helped himself, and when Tomoe protested, they struggled and he hit her with the mirror. He thought she was dead and decided to hide the body in the pond."

Masahira frowned. "Could not someone else . . ."

"No, no. It all fits," cried Akitada, rushing out. "Let us go back and tell the police."

When they reached the police building, the sergeant was talking to Okamoto Toson, who had finally come to report his daughter missing, and had ended up identifying Tomoe's body.

An uncomfortable scene ensued.

Okamoto's eyes went from Akitada to Lord Masahira. He recognized him instantly and prostrated himself. Masahira went to help him up, whispering something in his ear. Okamoto stiffened, then nodded. Masahira turned back to Akitada, saying in a tight voice, "Perhaps it will be best if you leave things to me now."

Akitada looked at Okamoto. The old man was very pale, but he nodded. "Lord Masahira is right. You

have done your part and quickly, too. If you will excuse me now and allow me some time to mourn and bury my child, I shall reward your efforts in a day or two."

Akitada flushed with embarrassment. He stammered that nothing was owed, that he was sorry to have brought no better news, and left as quickly as he could.

He slept poorly that night. Something kept nagging at him. When he finally fell asleep, he dreamt of foxes. At one point the vixen appeared on the fallen pine. She raised herself on her hind legs and paraded back and forth, dragging her tail behind like the skirts of a long robe, making a strange snickering noise. Then the fox's black eyes and pointed muzzle changed into the sharp features of Lady Chujo, who laughed, baring her fangs. He sat bolt upright, staring at the stripes made by the sunlight falling through the closed shutters of his room.

Stripes . . . lines . . . the thin red line on Tomoe's neck . . . the monk selling amulets . . . charms against fox spirits. Of course. The frightened Tomoe had bought one, and she had worn it before her death. Someone, the murderer, had torn it off her and had caused the red line on her neck.

Amulets! Lady Chujo had mentioned Tomoe's reliance on amulets. How had she known?

Akitada threw on his clothes and ran to police headquarters.

A yawning sergeant was just sitting down when Akitada burst into the office.

"That monk," cried Akitada. "Did you arrest him?"

The sergeant's mouth fell open again. He nodded.

"What did he say? Did he visit the girl?"

The sergeant nodded again.

"Well?"

The sergeant closed his mouth and sighed. "It's too early," he said reprovingly, "for so many questions, sir. However, the man absolutely denies killing the girl. He sold her a charm, that's all, he says. Of course we can still beat him and get a confession that way, but Lord Masahira has asked us not to."

Thank God for Masahira, thought Akitada. He, Akitada, had made a terrible mistake. He asked, "Did he say when he sold her the charm?"

"Yes. The day before we found her." The sergeant shook his head. "It didn't do her much good."

"The monk is innocent. You must let him go."

The sergeant raised his brows. "On whose say-so?"

Akitada's spirits sank. He knew now who the killer was, but he would never prove it. No doubt the poor monk would be beaten into some form of confession and condemned to forced labor at some distant frontier. And all of it was Akitada's fault. He had been wrong about the identity of the murderer three times. He had lost his job, failed Okamoto and Tomoe, and added the burden of guilt to his other miseries.

He went to see Lord Masahira.

Recalling too late that it was the emperor's birthday, Akitada fully expected to be turned away. Instead he was admitted instantly to

face who knew what additional disaster.

He found the captain, dressed in the grey robe of mourning, standing on the verandah of his study. He held something in his hand and was staring at it fixedly.

The face he turned towards Akitada was drawn and white. Today Masahira looked old beyond his years, and Akitada was intruding into the man's grief with a dangerous knowledge.

Reminding himself of the vacant-eyed monk in police custody, Akitada stammered, "Forgive the interruption, sir, but I've reconsidered the facts and I now know the monk is innocent. He merely sold one of his charms to Tomoe. It was the day before her body was found. I... believe someone else..." He broke off fearfully.

"Yes." Masahira's voice was flat, his eyes weary. "So you know what really happened?"

Hanging his head, Akitada murmured, "I believe so. Your lady..." He broke off. "I am very sorry, sir."

Masahira sighed heavily. "No sorer than I. I am responsible, even though I did not kill Tomoe. It was my foolishness that caused the tragedy. A double tragedy. I thought my wife was too accommodating when I asked her if I could bring Tomoe here. I should have suspected." Masahira's voice was bitter. "I found this in my wife's writing box."

Akitada glanced up. Masahira dangled a small wooden tablet with

an inscription. The hemp string was broken.

The amulet.

"Lady Chujo must have gone to the villa after you told her," said Akitada. "She mentioned the amulet, but Tomoe had just bought it from the monk, and not even you could have known that."

Masahira said, "I did not." He added heavily, "My wife will not be arrested. But she has agreed to renounce the world and spend the rest of her life in a remote nunnery. The monk will be released, of course, but I must ask your discretion. I already have Okamoto's."

Akitada thought again of the dangerous ground he had trodden. Deeply grateful, he bowed, saying, "Of course, my lord. I only regret having brought such misfortune to you and your family."

Masahira waved this aside.

"Okamoto is a most admirable character." He paused to look at Akitada. "I think," he said, "that, whatever your motives were originally, you acted from concern for him and pity for—" his voice shook, but he went on—"his daughter. You were quite right in your feelings about both." He broke off abruptly and turned away, weeping.

Akitada was backing from the room when Masahira spoke again. His voice had regained the tone of authority. "About your position at the ministry. I have had a word with Soga. You are to return to work immediately."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Carol Westwood/Tony Stone Images

I'm coming out now. I certainly am. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "July-August Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the February Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 237.

Rosejoy's Baby

DeLoris Stanton Forbes

It took the combined strength of the Devil's Disciple and the Winged Angel to transport the body to its disposal site. After the Devil's Disciple did the deed, the Winged Angel appeared (too late, yah yah yah, too late) to sigh and cry and suggest the use of the purloined Walgreen's cart to carry the body the final two hundred fifty yards. She was heavier than the Devil's Disciple had figured, so now that the deed was done, the Angel agreed to help push. "You'll get yours, you know," said the Angel, wings fluttering in agitation. "Oh, shut up," said the Devil's Disciple.

The lab report said she died from blunt trauma to the head; otherwise she was a healthy woman in her mid-twenties who was some four months pregnant. The lab said the baby had been a boy. I passed the report to George, who scanned it and grunted. "These babes are always falling for some no-good caveman type. Sooner or later they get knocked up and knocked around. This one got it good."

The lab said her final resting place—in a stand of bamboo in Big Tree Park—was not the scene of the murder. She'd been transported there after she had been brained with some kind of heavy, blunt instrument. To put it simply, she'd

been dumped, fetus and all, in a swamp.

I was standing off the boardwalk, mired at the edge of the bamboo plot. The bamboo was over six feet tall and plentiful; it had formed a bamboo cave, and that's where the body had been tossed.

I wondered how the perp had known about the bamboo cave. Big Tree Park wasn't among the most-visited of Fairland's sight-seeing attractions.

"Jeez." My partner George wasn't looking where I was looking. "This is some giant tree here. A thirty-five-hundred-year-old bald cypress." George was reading from a plaque behind a sturdy chain-link fence that encircled the Big Tree. "Some senator named Overstreet got the park started in 1927, it says. The tree's named The Senator in honor of this Overstreet guy. And old Cal Coolidge dedicated the park in 1929. Long before I was born."

"The world was interested in ecology before you were born, George."

I knelt down in the muck. Big Tree park was in Spring Hammock, a nature park set aside in the twenties to protect fifteen hundred acres of Florida native vegetation. A few years back they'd improved the area, built a boardwalk path over the marshy land through

the palms and oaks and palmettos and ferns and magnolias and bamboo. The killer must have carried the body along that boardwalk. A placard told me it was two hundred fifty winding yards into The Senator's site.

"Jeez." George was still reading the plaque at the tree. "It's got lightning rods all over it, and they figure it's one hundred and twenty-six feet high and forty-seven feet around. That's some mother of a tree."

"Just an estimate," I told him. "Made in 1946. It's grown since then."

"It's alive?"

"Sure. It gets purple flowers at the top in the spring. Kind of like an Easter hat. And there's a mate just up along the trail. I used to call that one The Senator's Lady. Are you through sightseeing? I want to get back to the station and talk to the people who found her." I climbed back over the rail. My shoes were squishy, my socks mucky.

"How come you know so much about this place anyway? I didn't even know it was here."

"I lived in the area, used to come here when I was a kid. Played Davy Crockett. Or Daniel Boone. I had a fringed mock-leather jacket, that was Davy, and an ersatz coon-skin cap turned me into Dan'l." I looked around. "Most times a place looks smaller when you've grown up. Funny, though, this one looks bigger. Taller trees, more underbrush. And after today, kind of eerie. Must be thousands of fingerprints along this wooden rail-

ing, so dusting is useless. Looking for footprints, ditto. Except back in the bamboo muck. Trouble is, it's muck. Too soft for footprints, I figure. We'll have to start from scratch. Who was she? That's the big question."

The pair of Greenpeace types had found the dead lady, a male named Alfred Collins and his female companion, one Lucy Pierce. They were talking to a television crew in the station lobby when we got back. "We're just visiting, you see, from Ohio. I'm from Cincinnati and Lucy's from Sharonville, but she works where I do in Cincy . . ."

The TV interviewer was not particularly interested in Cincy or Sharonville. "So tell us how you came across the unidentified body in Big Tree Park?"

"Well," Lucy jumped in with her answer, "we're nature lovers, you know, and we heard about this place, and even though it's kind of out of the way, we finally found it and we walked along—it's a kind of tropical jungle, you know, a primeval forest. We were looking at all the trees and Alfred saw a pair of owls up in a tree and we were just going along looking up till we got to the Big Tree, The Senator, that's what it's named, you know, but just beyond The Senator is this great big stand of bamboo, really tall and lots of it. I was astounded to see bamboo, especially that big, in the middle of Florida. I always thought of bamboo as coming from India or China or someplace like that . . ."

"So she pointed it out to me," Al-

fred said, "and we went closer and I thought I saw something white like a sneaker and I opened my mouth to say hey, somebody lost their sneakers in there, and then Lucy yelped and I saw the rest of the person, too, and we ran as fast as we could back to the caretaker's, at least we thought it was the caretaker's but there wasn't anybody there . . ."

"Just restrooms," said Lucy. "But way over on the other side of the parking lot beyond the park perimeter we saw people. There's what I guess you'd call a flower farm on the other side of the park . . ."

"Azaleas, that's their specialty," explained Alfred, "and gladioli . . ."

"Well, thank you very much," said the TV gal, turning off her microphone and signaling "enough" to her cameraman.

I stepped in. "Ms. Pierce, Mr. Collins, I'm Detective Edison, and this is Officer George. If we could have a few words with you . . ."

"Oh," Ms. Pierce looked unhappy. "There's another TV crew waiting outside. We promised . . ."

"Later," I said. "We won't take long." We might as well have left them at it. The story they told us had by now been told so often it was almost a standard speech. We got their local address and told them to stay put for a couple of days. We were through with them unless it turned out they had anything to do with the death of Ms. X. I gave them a doubtful with a capital D.

The lab had estimated the time of death to be about sixteen hours before discovery. The crime crew

had nosed around the bamboo, the boardwalk, and the rest of the area and had taken pictures of the crime scene before they allowed the body to be taken away. In addition to the pregnancy, the interim lab report revealed that the victim wore a dental bridge with four teeth. Somewhere a dentist knew the name of the lady, so that would give us a handle on who she was and that was a lucky break because the odds of a woman that young having false teeth were slim indeed. Meanwhile the flower people, as the Ohio couple had termed them, were being formally questioned in an interrogation room. We listened in.

The Reston family had been operating a nursery on Big Tree Road for as long as I could recall. I remembered a tall, somehow ominous Mr. Reston from my youth. He had given me the eye when I went down the road in my Crockett getup. Solid citizens from way back, they probably had nothing to do with the crime—the Reston duo, a man and woman, swore they knew absolutely nothing about the body—but what with proximity you never know.

I made a mental note to drop by their place later to buy some azaleas. I reckoned I could put them in pots on my apartment porch. Chances were they wouldn't like it there, but as I said before, you never know and it's my theory that people talk more comfortably when they're selling azaleas in their own environment. Police stations can be intimidating even for the totally innocent. Which the Res-

tons, brother and sister, probably were. But you never know.

The Devil's Disciple looked round the kitchen once more. No traces of blood, no signs of the struggle that had resulted in the doing of a deed that the Winged Angel had deplored. Sooner or later, the Disciple figured, they'd discover the identity of the corpse (She was dead, hooray, hooray! Out of the way forever!), and sooner or later the connection would be made and the questioning would come. "Where were you? Any witnesses? Not what I'd call a solid alibi." No matter, there'd be no clue, nothing could be proved, and the Winged Angel surely wouldn't confess, that would be aiding and abetting . . .

The crime lab hit it; the dental plate with the four teeth produced an identity. The murder victim was named Rosejoy Precious, an appellation that caused George to speculate that she must have been a topless dancer from one of the next town's porn clubs, but he was dead wrong there. She'd been a secretary, a very good secretary according to her employer, one H. Dietrich Fenster, Esquire.

When I was a little kid, H. Dietrich Fenster had been more than an esquire, he had been a county commissioner and even a candidate for mayor of Fairland, an election he'd lost by one hundred and three votes when his opponent accused him of being an atheist because he had no church affiliation. My father had been his campaign manager. The political

defeat took all the starch out of Fenster, so said my father, so he got out of government and stuck to lawyering, a profession he still pursued. "Too bad about the election," my father'd said. "He'd have been a hell of a good mayor." My mother had said, "I don't know, Harry. Is he really an atheist?" "No more than I am," said my father, and that left me totally confused because I couldn't remember my father's ever going to church, not once in all the years I lived at home. Later on, of course, I learned that not going to church didn't make you an atheist any more than being a Catholic instead of a Baptist or a Jew or a Muslim or a Hindu or a Shinto or a Baiha'i or any of those other well-intentioned beliefs meant you were headed for hell. But my mother wouldn't have bought that. She was baptized a Southern Baptist, and that was that forever and ever, amen.

Anyway, back to H. Dietrich Fenster. I don't think anyone knew exactly how old he was, but he was still active in the legal business and once in awhile you'd read about him in the papers when he'd been involved in some bizarre case or another. He still had law offices in Fairland's original bank building on First Street, and that's where we went to interview him.

"Ms. Precious!" exclaimed Fenster. "Good God."

"I guess you'll miss her," George snickered. "She must have been pretty good to look at before the perp rearranged her face. Probably didn't matter much how fast she could type."

Fenster pursed his mouth. "We don't use typewriters any more, young man. This is the computer age, and Ms. Precious was an expert. Tell me what happened. You say she was found in Big Tree Park?"

I recounted the discovery. "We just made the I.D. through her dentist. But all we know about her is her name and that she told Dr. Edwards you'd recommended him. The address she gave turned out to be a previous address; the apartment manager said she moved out at the end of last year. Seems like you can fill us in, Mr. Fenster. Where does—did she live now?"

Fenster got out of his swivel leather chair, paced. "She moved back in with her mother. She was concerned about her mother; she thought if she moved back she could watch out for her." Fenster might be old, but he paced like a young man.

"Her mother is sick? What's wrong with her?" George had his pen poised on his notebook.

"If you call it a sickness, I guess she was. Her mother was enamored of a young man. Ms. Precious considered him a gigolo."

"Ms. Precious's father is deceased?" I asked. Ms. Precious was in her mid-twenties; that would make her mother close to fifty one way or another, kind of in my ballpark. Early for death this day and age, assuming that the father was in the same age bracket.

"No, her mother divorced him. As a matter of fact, I handled the legal work for Ms. Precious's mother. We did rather nicely in the fi-

nancial division, and Ms. Precious managed to separate her mother from the would-be Romeo, so it seemed to me that her troubles were over." He clicked his tongue. "This is terrible, truly terrible."

"Was the Romeo responsible for the dental problem?" I asked.

Fenster gave me a quick glance. "She never said so—Ms. Precious was reticent about personal matters—but I understand she had some sort of a confrontation with him. I offered to represent her in a harassment suit, but she refused. Ms. Precious was quite shy. Very astute of you, young man. What did you say your name was?"

"I'm Ben Edison. I believe you knew my father."

"Edison? I certainly did. So you are his son Ben? I recall they nicknamed you Genius for some reason or another. Your dad's running airboats down around Okeechobee, I hear. That's Sam's way, all right. He always went against the tide. Running airboats when he should be up there in Tallahassee running the state."

The thought made me smile. "I reckon he'd turn Florida upside-down. My mother, bless her soul, called him a maverick."

Fenster shook his head of thick silver hair. "Too bad she had to leave you. That cancer is a pure devil disease. But enough reminiscing, young Edison. You'll want Ms. Precious's address and maybe her father's and the name of the Romeo and all such. And you'll want to go through her desk, I wager." He shook his head again. "I almost called for Ms. Precious to

give you the details, but I guess I'll have to do it myself." More head-shaking. "A terrible thing, terrible."

Ms. Precious's desk was nasty-neat. Everything in it pertained to Fenster's legal affairs so far as I could tell at a glance, but there was something stuck in the back of the bottom file drawer, some kind of plastic bag. Dillard's was the name of the store supplying the bag, and inside we found some tiny shirts, a pair of bootees, and a soft yellow blanket, a pathetic collection for a baby who never lived. George was touched. "The bastard," he muttered. I took it that he didn't refer to the baby.

There was something else in the back of the filing cabinet, a book. The front of it identified the volume as *My Diary*, and on the fly-leaf she had written DIARY OF ROSEJOY PRECIOUS. THIS IS MY BOOK. I once had a girlfriend who kept a diary. She wrote faithfully in it for about a week, then it began to peter off, but Rosejoy Precious was faithful to her diary. I skimmed to the last page, dated the day before she died. I felt as though I'd come upon a pot of gold beneath a thundercloud.

The last entry read, "I have wonderful news, Diary, but I won't let you in on the secret until it really comes true—I might jinx myself. But I will say this, tomorrow is the beginning of the rest of my life! Like Edgar Allan Poe wrote, 'And all my days are trances, and all my nightly dreams are where thy grey eye glances, and where thy footstep gleams—in what ethereal dances,

by what eternal streams. . . . ' Oh my dear diary, I can hardly wait!"

"I don't get it," said George. "What's Edgar Allan Poe got to do with—"

"I'm taking these items as probable evidence, Mr. Fenster. I'll sign for them." To George I wondered aloud, "Grey eyes? Did she mean that literally?"

"Grey eyes? Oh, I get it. The guy, whoever he is, has grey eyes. And she was expecting a proposal."

"Maybe," I said. "Could be. You never know."

According to the obituary, services for Ms. Rosejoy Precious will be held at Saint Mary's by the Lake Church at two P.M., followed by interment at Blessed Angels Memorial Gardens. Well, well, they made the connection sooner than I expected . . . well, well. It would be fun to attend her funeral. I suppose I'll find the Winged Angel sitting in the front pew. . . .

Ms. Precious's mother was, in George's words, a dish. Fiona Precious was indeed most attractive, a slender lady with a fine-boned face and a cascade of silky blonde hair. Of course, we weren't seeing her at her best; she'd been crying, and her nose was red and the almost platinum hair disarrayed.

The first thing she said to us was, "Jeffrey. Jeffrey Wilson. I tried to tell her . . ." And she began to tear up again.

"Now, now, Fiona." The fairhaired young man sitting next to her in the front pew pawed at her shoulder and proffered a fresh

tissue. I dubbed him Cornell Eps, Fiona's past and probably reinstated in-time-of-stress liaison. He looked, I thought, like a cruder version of the film heartthrob Leonardo DiCaprio. George thought he looked more like Johnny Depp.

"What about Jeffrey Wilson?" I wanted to know. People were filing in and my questions came at the wrong time in the wrong place, but in my business you take what you can get.

"I never knew what she saw in that man," said Fiona through a handful of tissue. "He struck her, you know. She said it was an accident, but I said if they do it once they'll do it again."

"Where can we find this Jeffrey Wilson?"

She took the tissue away from her eyes and scowled. "The nerve! Look, Cornell, he's come to the funeral. There he is, officer, just coming in the door. That's Jeffrey Wilson."

"Now that one," murmured George, "is a piece of work."

Jeffrey Wilson had a shining head, completely bald, shaven I guessed, there wasn't a blemish on it. He wore a suit with vest; the color was navy verging on purple. His eyes were striking, an unusual shade of blue, almost lilac. He used them now to case the mourners. They flicked past George and me, and I had the idea that he tagged us right off. He had someone with him, a leggy young woman wearing black tights and a knee-length, black V-necked top. They came tentatively into the church and found seats at the

rear. She whispered something, he nodded. Fenster came in then, noted the couple and came on by. "Guess we didn't do a good extermination," he said softly, nodding at Eps and Mrs. Precious.

I wanted to ask him about the Wilson character, but we couldn't talk now. The preacher, minister, whatever—the sign outside identified him as Pastor J. J. Favorsham—appeared in the pulpit. George groaned. He'd often said how he hated funerals; he'd shut his ears and think of bowling consecutive strikes until he had a perfect game, that was his formula for funeral survival. I had no such fantasy to fall back on, so I listened and watched. I hoped the reverend was for tearjerkers. I'd found you could sometimes learn a lot from people's reactions to heart-rending phrases. But all I came up with was that Fiona took her daughter's death hard.

When the ceremony was over and the casket had been wheeled down the aisle, funeral attendants walked the mother and her friend out before we were permitted to follow. By the time we got outside, the Wilson man had disappeared. The grieving mother and her escort got into the car behind the hearse; the other funeral attendees made their way to their cars. Among their ranks I noted the Restons, but most of the people were strangers to me.

When the cemetery procession began, George and I pulled away, headed for Fiona Precious's residence. We needed to talk to her and to look over Rosejoy's possessions,

so we went to wait. A lousy time to show up among the funeral guests, but as I said to George, " 'Art is long, and Time is fleeting, and our hearts, though stout and brave, still, like muffled drums, are beating funeral marches to the grave.' " In response to his incredulous look I added, "That's Longfellow. I can quote with the best of them."

"Huh!" said George. "So can I. 'Once there was an elephant who tried to use the telephunt—No! No! I mean an elephone who tried to use the telephone.' "

"George," I said truthfully, "at times you amaze me. Who said that?"

He looked smug. "My mother."

Fiona was face-deep in tissues when they arrived. I took it that the actual interment had been especially hard on her.

We followed them up to the house. Eps, who was propping her up, three women I didn't know, and the Reverend Favorsham were murmuring soothing words as they went in. The reverend almost shut the door on us, and when I politely pushed my way in, he looked as though he wished he had.

"Not now," he said. "No interviews now."

I showed him my I.D., and he backed off with a scowl. "I hardly think this is the time . . ."

"There is never a time," I told him.

"It's all right," Fiona Precious interceded for us. "They're trying to find out who—"

"To quote the Good Book, there is no rest for the weary," intoned Cornell Eps with a pious glare.

"I think that's no rest for the wicked," said George with a smirk.

Actually, it's no peace for the wicked. "We would like to see your daughter's room, Mrs. Precious. If you'd accompany us?"

Rosejoy's room was a little girl's room: canopied bed, ruffled curtains, and all. I suspected it had been that way since her childhood, never changed even after she'd left the nest. Her clothes hung in perfect alignment in the model closet, her shoes in shoe-rack pockets, her handbags and belts on hooks. "I'd guess you never had a messy-room problem with this one," I said over my shoulder.

"Rosejoy was a perfectionist," her mother told me. Her eyes were sea-colored, like opal.

"Wasn't that occasionally inconvenient?"

She didn't waver, and for once her eyes were dry. "Sometimes," amended that to, "not really. Perfectionists can be demanding, but Rosejoy was an angelic child. One year she was poster girl for the United Way. See, there's a copy behind her bed. The canopy kind of hides it, but you can see Rosejoy was the very picture of a little princess." She broke down once more. "Oh my beautiful child! How could this happen? You must bring her killer to justice!"

"We'll do our best." George's expression was a mixture of grown man embarrassment and little boy sincerity. I went on with my look-see.

Rosejoy had a French provincial desk, all gold and white. It held stationery and stamps in a brass

holder and a set of pens in a porcelain hold-all, a bill from Dillard's for twenty-eight ninety-nine, and a receipt for gas from a Texaco station. I said, "Her car? Is it here?"

"Yes." With one final sniff Fiona recovered her composure. "It's the dark blue Toyota in the garage. Next to my Dodge. Wherever she went that last day, she didn't drive. Someone must have picked her up." She settled herself in the chair that faced the desk, began to open drawers. "I really don't know what she kept in here. I never spied on my daughter." She glanced up. "I trusted her completely."

"Nobody saw her leave? When did you see her last? Where were you?"

"The day—the afternoon of the day—it happened, she came home from work, said she was going out and she had to change. I asked her where, but she didn't answer; I guess she didn't hear me. I was going out myself. I was due at my bridge club, so I left without speaking to her again." She sighed deeply, more tears formed. "I don't think I'll ever play bridge again."

I put my question again. "Did anyone see her leave? One of your neighbors? Anybody?"

Head down, she said, "No one. We have only two sets of immediate neighbors, and they're in and out, work and play and all that. They're what the papers call yuppies. I couldn't find anyone who saw her. The other policeman, a lieutenant?, didn't have any luck either. It was almost like she was invisible."

Cornell Eps appeared in the

doorway. "Fiona, your friends are asking for you."

She pulled herself together, asked us, "Is that all?"

"Go ahead," said George, but I had one last question. "What did she do for fun? What were her hobbies?"

"Hobbies?" Fiona looked blank. "I don't think she—well, she did volunteer work at the church, in the pastor's office. And she puttered around in the back garden; she liked flowers. And tomatoes. Last year she nurtured four tomato plants, actually produced some fruit. She read a lot, spent time at the library, and she enjoyed the mall. She used to say she got her exercise shopping at the mall. I guess those were her hobbies."

"Fiona?" said Eps.

"We'll get back to you if we need you. Thanks," I said and watched her go. Early on I'd decided there must be a cop smell, some kind of aura, a dark shadow, something ugly; everybody always seems eager to get away.

Paul Reston, Jr., was mixing compost with potting soil when I found him. He'd told Lieutenant Gross that he'd been out of town the night Ms. Precious's body was junked. A big plant show in Atlanta—he'd gone to pick up some exotic species. "More and more we're getting calls for exotics," he told me. "It's all these Yankees coming down here. They think we can grow anything in Florida."

"Maybe they can," I said, "but I can't. Tell me, can I grow azaleas in pots? I haven't got much yard where I live."

He straightened up. He must have been a third generation flower-growing Reston; a tall man, taller than I and I'm not short, he gave the impression he was looking down on me. "The azalea's a member of the rhododendron family, you know; that's why it does so well north of us in the Carolinas. They don't sink deep roots, so pot growing's been done—whether a plant makes it or not depends on how the plant likes its location, that's the way I look at it. You want to try it, be my guest. It might help if you have a good-sized pot, not necessarily deep. Get some azalea food, follow the instructions, and have at it. You don't have to be a magician to grow stuff; all you've got to do is pay attention. That's the way I look at it."

"Got any tomato plants?"

"It's the wrong time of the year—some people can have a winter crop, but it's tricky."

"I don't reckon you recall selling some plants last year to Rosejoy Precious? The girl we found in the park?"

He shook his head. "Don't know as I ever met her. Maybe it was Pauline. My sister. She might recall."

I indicated a couple of azaleas. "I reckon I'll take these two. You keep some kind of security around at night, you must. We have had a bunch of cases of plantnapping in the Fairland area. Some character could bring a truck in here and sell the lot out on Route I-95 without anybody knowing."

Reston grinned. He was growing a mustache; it was still kind of

hit-and-miss. "Come up to the house with me, I'll show you our security. Their names are Pete and Repeat."

Pete and Repeat were big and black with fang teeth, a handsome looking pair of Doberman pinschers in a roomy cage. They came up to Reston, licked his hand through the chain-link, backed off, and growled at me. "We let 'em roam at night," he explained. "We haven't had any problems."

"So there'd be nobody around at night—on two feet," I mused.

"Not if they know what's good for them."

"But the dogs don't go over into the park?"

"We're fenced, the park's fenced, and the dogs are trained. Can I sell you a bag of azalea food? How about some bone meal and potting soil? Have you got pots for your plants, we've got a pretty good selection . . ."

The Devil's Disciple had warned the Winged Angel, "They'll be calling on us sooner or later, you know. So don't do anything stupid."

The Winged Angel looked worried. "You know I'm not good at lying. Remember in grade school, you beat up the Higgins kid, and I was supposed to be your alibi. Mr. Jostyn hadn't had me in his office five minutes before I rattled on you."

"Yes, and you're still paying for it, aren't you? You're my slave because you've got no character. Angels are supposed to have character and you're a gutless wonder, so foul up again and I'll delete you

completely, you got that? You'll cease to exist. There'll be no saving you this time."

"I'll try," whimpered the Angel. "What do you want me to say?"

George had news for me.

"Something funny's been going on," he reported. "You remember those guys, Eps and Wilson? Well, turns out they live in the same apartment complex. Two different streets, back-to-back buildings. What do you think the chances are that they knew each other before they began going after mother and daughter? Male gold-diggers, something like that?"

"Could be they didn't," I decided. "I don't know all the people in my own building."

"Yeah, but could be they did. The complex comes complete with pool and gym, they could have mixed and mingled. What do you think?"

"I think it's about time we had a little get-together with the fellas. Want to toss a coin, who gets Wilson, who takes Eps?"

I won Eps, if win is the right word. Cornell Eps was the fair-haired boy I'm told women dream about, tall, muscular, good teeth, and dimpled chin. I could see, almost, why Fiona Precious fell for him. Eps, I reckoned was from Alabama. All of us Southerners come equipped with accents, but his was more pronounced than most.

Turned out I was right. He hailed from "Birmin'ham. Born and raised there. Came down here when y'all got to needin' skilled folks, on account of Mr. Disney. My for-tay is hairdressin'. I've won

national prizes in hairdressin'. I got me a big followin' in hairdressin', that's how I met Ms. Fiona Precious. I feel so real sad for Ms. Precious, losin' her daughter that way. And I understand the poor little thing was p.g. Isn't that the absolute pits? Whoever did that awful thing ought to be tarred and feathered before they hang him, that's what my daddy would have done if it had been his daughter. 'Course, my daddy was an old fashioned Southern gentleman."

Cornell had been busy the evening that Rosejoy met her tragic end, that's the way he put it.

"I got this big following, you see, and some of my clients are so busy they cain't come in in the day so I do them the courtesy of goin' to their homes at night. That night—you said it was Saturday—I was giving Ms. Florence Henderson a perm. No, she's not the actress, although I do the hair of many famous actresses. My Ms. Henderson is an elderly lady who has trouble gettin' around. Here's her phone number and address if you want to call her. She'll tell you that her dear friend Cornell was right there shampooin' and permin' and blowdryin' till the cows came home. I tell you that just in case—though I can't imagine why you should—you had any idea that Cornell had anythin' at all to do with the demise of Ms. Rosejoy Precious. Isn't that just about the dearest name you ever heard? I told Fiona it was proof positive that she has this wonderful sense of the romantic..."

Cornell Eps' eyes were as blue

as the Florida skies. Bright blue. Without a cloud.

Jeffrey Wilson's alibi was a night out with the lads as he put it. He named three buddies who had accompanied him to the Planet Hollywood cafe on the night in question.

George had zeroed in on his relationship with Rosejoy. "He answered funny," said George. "Like he hardly knew her at all. He's this weird looking guy, you know, with the shaved head and earrings, but big, a really big guy. I'd guess about six two, two twenty, something like that, maybe more. He's gonna have a weight problem later on, I figure, soon as he stops going to the gym every day. He said that's where he met Eps. Doesn't know him real well, he said, but he does run into him at the gym.

"Anyway, according to him, he only went out with Rosejoy twice, once to dinner and another time she dragged him to Shakespeare in the Park. The way he talked, he sounded like he was bored out of his skull with Ms. Precious, so I asked him who the gal was he brought to the funeral and he said she's his steady now, name's Ellie. Ellie Bevans, got her address here plus the buddies' numbers. I don't know, Edison, but I don't feel it. He impresses me as a swinger, and from what I hear of our Ms. Precious, I don't figure she was."

"Maybe not, but she managed to get herself pregnant. Did you ask him about the assault that cost her her teeth? What did he say to that?"

"He looked me straight in the

eye and said no way, he never laid a hand on her. He said he's got a temper, all right, but he's gotta feel passionate about something before he'll start swinging. That's the word he used, passionate. To tell you the truth, Ben, I don't think she was his type. Like I said, he's a swinger. Want me to pay a call on this Ellie Bevans? Or will you take it?"

"You, I guess. I've got some other fish to fry. What color were his eyes?"

"His eyes? Oh yeah, that grey business. Well, his eyes aren't grey, no way. They're blue—dark blue, more like purple. They say Liz Taylor's eyes are purple; so are Wilson's. Like I say, I don't figure he's our boy. Maybe Eps?"

I shook my head. "I've a hunch that Ms. Florence Henderson will check out as advertised. Cornell is—I figure Fiona Precious latched onto him because he's safe, if you know what I mean."

"Safe?"

"On the gay side. Women like gay men; they're usually bright and charming and no problem in the bedroom department. Fenster said Rosejoy was concerned about her mother's attachment to Cornell. I don't think she should have given it much worry time. Maybe Fiona didn't know. If she didn't, she was double naive. Wilson would have gotten the message. You figure that's his bag, too?"

George shook his head. "No way. So now what? Who's next?"

"Back to square one. The lab got a DNA sample of the fetus. When we connect the killer to the crime,

a match will help to cinch it. But first we need another DNA to make the comparison, and we can't get that until we've made some kind of a case—that's our catch twenty-two."

At suppertime I microwaved a Stouffer's chicken special and opened the diary. It had been burning a hole in my pocket all day.

She'd begun it in January on New Year's Day. She'd been to a New Year's Eve party, she said, a party sponsored by the Fairland Historical Society. She'd gone alone—"Jeffrey hasn't called in weeks. I guess I'm not his type, but I don't care. I don't think he's my type either. I thought when I met him that he was exciting, but he's not. He's trying to look exciting, he manages that, but inside he's just ignorant. And crude. My mother was right."

She'd met some people at the party. She mentioned a man who was writing a book about old Fairland and another man who had asked her to dance. ("He's a really good slow dancer; slow dancing is nice.") A husband and wife pair of ecologists were worth noting by name ("Heath and Beverly Porter, they've moved up here from the Miami area") as was Eddie Armstrong, an attorney who thought H. Dietrich Fenster was "an old charlatan, I don't know how a nice girl like you can work for that old man."

"I told him," she noted, "that Mr. Fenster was the kindest, most intelligent man I know, and Mr. Armstrong looked at me like I was crazy. I'm going to tell Mr. Fenster.

That man shouldn't be allowed to go around saying such things. Maybe we can sue him?"

In February she went out with the dancing man, by name Henry Davis, and had "a pleasant time, but isn't it sad that he's so shallow? Mr. Fenster says somewhere in this world there's a soulmate for everyone. Maybe I should enroll in one of those computer dating clubs?"

Come March she accepted an invitation to *Phantom of the Opera*, coming to Orlando in April. The invitation came from one Charles Evers, who turned out to be the man writing the book about old Fairland. Seemed Charles Evers had sought out H. Dietrich for an interview, at which time Charles and Rosejoy renewed their seemingly platonic acquaintance.

I found myself yawning by the time I got to April. If the girl had been four months pregnant, she had to do something to get that way and soon, time was awastin'.

May was the month when the writing changed. All her previous entries had been open and almost childlike. In May she got real cosy and began to refer to a He in capital letters. I don't think this particular He referred to the Almighty. He, whoever he was, ran into her at the local Publix. She was shopping in the produce department when He said He could grow watermelons twice the size of the supermarket offerings, and that claim led to a free watermelon offer, which in turn led to the delivery of "truly the biggest and tastiest watermelon I've ever

seen. I offered to pay him, but He was insulted at the very thought, and if I wanted to repay him, I could treat him to a cup of coffee at Dunkin' Donuts."

A cup of coffee at Dunkin' Donuts was the first in a series of casual meetings that culminated in dinner dates, and I thought, uh-huh, could be He's my man. But who was He? What was his name? Why was she being so coy?

Her only hint as to why came in a rambling paragraph about past disappointments ("He said He was sorry, he swore it would never happen again." Could that pertain to the tooth loss?) and introspective revelations: "Mother wondered why Charles Evers didn't call, she liked him, and I said I don't know, Mother, I guess he just doesn't find me very interesting. I'm not 'interesting,' I know. I'm rather dull, actually; I'm too precise. Mother says I'm a perfectionist and perfectionists are hard to live with. I don't think I'd be that hard to live with if I had a chance. I believe He finds me interesting. He hangs on my every word!"

I made a list of the men mentioned in Rosejoy Precious's diary, leading off with He. Then came employer Fenster, Pastor Faversham, Jeffrey Wilson, Cornell Eps, Henry Davis, Charles Evers, dentist Edwards, and (unmentioned but possibly the watermelon connection?) Paul Reston. Just before I turned off the lights, I looked up elephants in my *Bartlett's* and found George's mother's charming little rhyme about elephants and telephones. It came from a poem entitled "Ele-

telephony" by Laura Elizabeth Richards, 1850–1943. If I could've, I would have said to Rosejoy Precious, "Now see, there's an example—the kind of nineteenth century lady who'd think like that, that's interesting." Poor Ms. Precious, she would never know.

But . . . she thought He found her interesting. He must have found her interesting enough to take to bed, but in some men's worlds that doesn't mean much.

Her use of the word interesting intrigued me. She could have tried for sexy or beautiful or desirable, but all she wanted was to be interesting. Well, she'd been good to look at. And bright enough. Good manners, oh yes, well-behaved. You could take Ms. Precious anywhere. All of which must have been important to Him. And what did that tell me?

He was a conformist. Maybe a mother's boy. And considering the effort involved, physically strong. Which set his age at a probable range of late twenties to forty, old enough to care about appearances, young enough to be able to transport a body two hundred fifty yards through a primeval forest in the dark. And there must have been a vicious side to him. She'd spoken of dental visits, but she'd never explained why, and I took it from the one reference to disappointments that he slapped her around. Maybe only once? "He swore it would never happen again." What else had she written about ill treatment? I thumbed back to June, no, not then, July . . . "I think it's the humidity that

causes us to behave badly in the high heat of the year. Why, even my mother berated me this morning, and I must confess I reciprocated. I will not be ill-treated, not by anybody! I know a girl from high school who married her childhood sweetheart. We thought it so romantic. I saw her on television last week. She's hiding out in a home for battered women. How can any woman with any self-pride get herself in such a situation? It's pathetic! I refuse, absolutely refuse to be intimidated—by anyone!”

Yes. Pathetic. My last thought before I dropped off to sleep was that I needed to talk to Dr. Edwards. Maybe she'd said something to him about her attacker. Then, at the very last minute, just before blackout, I told myself I was missing someone. There was another man in Rosejoy Precious's life—her father. Fenster had given me his last known address. I set my schedule for next morning.

Derek Precious lived in a mobile home in a trailer park. It was not a lots-of-money mobile home, it was a much-lived-in mobile home that had seen numerous casual occupants with lackadaisical habits. The place was a mess outside, ditto inside.

He'd been a goodlooking man. Traces remained—a good bone structure, strong jaw, widow's peak hairline. But now his skin was sallow and unshaven, his dark eyes were sparkless, his hair uncombed. “I meant to go to the funeral,” he told me, “but I was too hungover and I figured she wouldn't want me there anyway.”

“When did you last see your daughter?” I tried to imagine a fastidious Rosejoy Precious embracing this unclean parent and wondered how close their relationship had been.

“I never laid eyes on either of them, mother or daughter, after the divorce. They took me to the cleaners financially, that's all they wanted from me. So I said to hell with them, to hell with all of them, and I stayed away. You wouldn't go around either if you got kicked in the teeth every time you made a move.” Even his teeth looked dirty. Derek Precious had hit the very bottom of his personal pot-hole.

He was working as a janitor these days, having lost his job as a used car salesman, that being the first position he'd sought after closing his insurance agency in order to pay the divorce toll. He was as bitter as a sour orange. I couldn't help feeling a small surge of sympathy until he got to the reason Fiona divorced him. “Sure, I slapped her around a couple of times, and I had a woman or two on the side, but that's man business and lots of women put up with it so long as they got a Saks' Fifth Avenue credit card, right? Am I right or am I right?”

I told him about the death of his grandchild, but that didn't seem to affect him any more than the murder of his daughter. He made my skin crawl after awhile, and I got out of the trailer, passed a slatternly looking woman in his neighbor's doorway and thought, she's just his style. Poor Rosejoy Pre-

cious, he must have been one source of those disappointments mentioned in her diary. Everybody's always talking about the value of mothers, but nobody realizes how important fathers are to a kid. I was no prize package, but I owed much of the best part of me to my dad.

Mentally I marked names off my hit list. Fenster? Too old. Pastor Faversham? Far out in left field. Jeffrey Wilson and Cornell Eps, alibis that held up. Henry Davis and Charles Evers, she didn't like them well enough to go to bed with them. Paul Reston? Again the alibi bit. That left Dr. Edwards, a very doubtful starter. Rosejoy's chums were fast striking out in the guilt department. Somebody had to have killed her, somebody had to impregnate her, He was the one for sure, but who the devil was He? I had one rule when totally frustrated: go to see the old know-it-all, Charlie Rule.

Charlie Rule was in the same age bracket as Fenster, but Charlie was probably the reason I was in law enforcement. He was a retired cop who had been a neighbor when we lived out in Spring Hammock. After he left the force, Charlie had decided to grow oranges. "I'm a dumb Dora when it comes to farming and stuff," he confessed, and I could always find him in his grove mucking around with his orange trees.

Charlie loved to talk. He'd tell me all these tales about cop cases till I was bug-eyed, but he liked to listen, too. He'd been my grownup who listened; kids who have a

grownup who listens are lucky kids in my mind. I'd go over to Charlie's after school, and he'd be sitting out in his barn-office and I'd tell him anything that came to my mind. Like I said, he'd listen and comment, and then I'd tell him something else, and whatever was puzzling me, Charlie had a way of working out the solution, any solution, to a crime or to one of my juvenile problems.

He called his method of reasoning getting the itch. At least that's the way I remember it. I'd go home and tell my dad, and usually he'd nod and say, that Charlie Rule, he's one wise old bird, so maybe that's why I'm a cop and that's why, when I hit a speed bump, I still go to Charlie.

He doesn't look a year older, Charlie doesn't. He's got some secret fountain of youth. I've never asked what because I figure it's not something that can be shared. This day I told him about Rosejoy Precious, and he said he'd heard something about it on television but since he takes what he hears on television with a grain of salt he'd like to hear what I had to say. So I went through the whole story from discovery to Derek Precious, and as always, he listened.

"Have you talked to Pauline Reston?"

I shook my head.

"Well—" he was chewing a toothpick, which he moved from one side of his mouth to the other "—seems to me that's your next move. Pauline Reston's the smart one in that pair. I've always had the idea that, with twins, one gets more of this

and the other gets more of that. I seem to recall that Pauline Reston got more than her share of brains."

"Then, according to your theory, Paul Reston should have come up with some kind of a plus. Pauline got the brains and Paul got what?"

"Sweetness. Paul Reston was one sweet little boy. You know, the kind who gets pushed around a lot in school. They say his sister had to physically protect him more than once. Anyway, my point is maybe Pauline saw something that night, being as she's the kind who'd notice things. Then again, maybe she didn't. But it's worth a talk. Let's see, the men you mentioned. Fenster? No way. Dietrich hasn't got the macho urge any more, maybe he never did have. The Reverend Faversham—you were really reaching there. Oh, I know, so-called men of God are sometimes self-ordained, but not Faversham. The boytoys, what were their names, Wilson and Eps; sounds to me like if either one had been involved he'd just slip the lady some cash and tell her to get rid of it. If she wouldn't, hell, so what?"

He leaned back in his old auto seat chair and cogitated. "We're assuming that the pregnancy and the murder are cause and effect—that young lady was too damned close-mouthed for her own good. I'll do some more thinking, Ben, but so far I haven't got the itch. You know what I mean, that inner starter that gets your engine running. Right now all I can say is call on Pauline Reston."

Looking back, I had this vague memory that the Restons had

been two or three grades behind me in school, and since I was busy bonding with my peers, was into sports and nagging for a car, I didn't pay attention to younger kids, let them fight their own battles. Thus I expected Pauline Reston to look like her brother (*sans moustache*) and was surprised to find that except for height—she too was a tall one—they didn't much resemble one another. His hair was dark, hers was on the blonde side. His eyes were a mixture of blue and brown like aggie marbles; her eyes were paler, more blue than brown. His face was soft; if I poked his cheek with a finger, it might deflate. Her chin was firm, her cheekbones prominent. She said, "Can I help you?"

I said, "I hope so." And then, while she waited for me to go on, "I bought some azaleas the other day. From your brother. I don't think they look too healthy, I've got them in my trunk. Can you give them a look-see?"

She poked the soil around the plants with one finger. "I don't know about these containers."

"I live in an apartment. On the second floor. I put them out on my porch; they get plenty of sun."

She frowned. "That may be part of your problem right there—azaleas like some shade. Furthermore, this isn't a real good time to plant them—didn't Paul tell you?"

I got him off the hook. "Yes, but I was pretty determined. I guess I have a lot to learn about gardening. That's because in real life I'm a cop. Ben Edison. I think we more or less grew up together."

Her "Really?" was cool. "Do you want us to take these back? Is that what you want?"

I shook my head. "No, I'll muddle on." I shut the trunk. "What I really want is to talk to you. About the night Rosejoy Precious was killed. When her body was dumped in Big Tree Park."

She looked me straight in the eye. "What could I possibly know about that?"

"Your brother told me he was out of town but you were here. Maybe you saw something, heard something? We're having a kind of a tough time with this, anything at all might be a help."

"Sorry," she said and turned on her heel, headed back to the shop.

I tried a stab in the dark. "I was looking around just now, thought I saw a vegetable patch in the back there. And what looked like some watermelon vines. You folks grow watermelons?"

"It's the wrong season for watermelons."

She threw the words over her shoulder. I stayed close behind.

"I know, but they look like watermelon vines. I know a lady who says you grow the best watermelons she ever ate. Now, I'm really fond of watermelon. I suppose there's no chance at all I could grow a vine on my porch—what do you think?"

"I think you're wacko, that's what I..."

Paul Reston loomed up in the near doorway.

"What's up?" he asked. "Have we got a problem?"

"Nothing I can't handle," she said

and I interrupted with, "Well, there might be a problem."

The itch had hit me, the inexplicable signal that told me I was in the ballpark, all I needed to do was get a hit, even a single. It took two people to transport Rosejoy's body, two strong people, and here I was, facing two strong people. I took a calculated swing.

"Who decided to get rid of her? Who did the deed while the other watched?"

Pauline Reston's eyes blazed. "Wacko, that's what. What are you talking about? Paul, I think—it sounds like he's accusing us."

Paul Reston made a sound as though he'd been punched in the stomach. He gagged, and for a minute I thought he was going to throw up. Pauline turned on her brother and slapped him across the face. He blinked and backed off.

"He's subject to fits," she told me, face suddenly smooth. "You've upset him, brought on an attack." She reached for the telephone, "I'll call 911 for the medics, Paul. Just sit down, you'll be all right. Shut your mouth—and breathe naturally."

That's it. Shut your mouth.

"I... I... I..." gurgled Reston.

Pauline took charge.

"Bring your car up," she ordered. "We won't have time for the medics."

I went closer to Reston. "They say they come out of it. They say just watch, if they get a tongue in the throat, pull it up and out..."

"Get your car!"

I went. When I came back, he was lying quietly, breathing normally. "He's come out of it," she told

me. "Just like you said. I guess I had you bring your car up for nothing,"

"I see." And then, "Actually, I've been waiting. Outside the door. I carry a small recorder around with me, it saves me from getting writer's cramp. Want to hear what I heard?"

Paul Reston sat up slowly. He looked at his sister, but she paid him no attention, she was concentrating on me. I punched *REPLAY*.

"Control yourself, you fool. He's only stringing bits and pieces together. He doesn't know, I tell you. Pull yourself together! And take that wounded look off your face. You're the one who got us into this mess. I told you to leave the girl alone. I told you you couldn't marry, not ever. Winged Angels can't marry, neither can Devil's Disciples, period, end of sentence. We'll spend our lives together, side by side, the bad and the good, all stirred together by our feckless father before we were born. And then—oh, the gall of it—you had to go and get the silly girl with child! When she told me, blinking at me with those cow eyes, I had a pair of bull clippers in my hand, heavy bull clippers I was using to prune

the crepe myrtle, so I used them on Ms. Rosejoy Precious. To prune... *Our children are seedlings, seedlings that we feed and nurture and grow... beautiful seedlings, perfect plants, bearing perfect fruit... Lie back now, he'll be coming...*"

"I never figured the killer for a woman" was George's comment. "Things have sure changed; they are even sending them to the electric chair. Shakespeare said it: the female is getting deadlier than the male."

"It was Kipling," I corrected him. "And what he said was that the female of the species is more deadly than the male. The whole thing goes, 'When the Himalayan peasant meets the he-bear in his pride, he shouts to scare the monster, who will often turn aside; but the she-bear thus accosted rends the peasant tooth and nail, for the female of the species is more deadly than the male.'"

"Whatever," said George.

"And George, that little elephant jingle your mother taught you..."

I could feel him tensing. "It's real clever," I said. "I'd like to write it down."

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Cro-Magnon, P.I.

Mike Reiss

Oswald Plummer, Oxford don of paleontology, was told by his doctor to stop his excessive drinking. So Plummer moved to France, where his drinking was considered moderate; someday he would retire to Finland, where he'd be considered a model of sobriety. Oswald now gave tours of the prehistoric cave paintings of Lascaux, the one town in France where you couldn't get a decent meal. His days were spent one hundred feet underground in a small, damp cave filled with American tourists. If this wasn't Hell, Oswald thought, it was just a few yards away. Today's group consisted of the thick-waisted and -witted Jeter family from someplace called Tuscaloosa.

"Behold the dwellings of Cro-Magnon man," Oswald began dramatically. "Perhaps fifty cavemen lived here in a complex, tightly knit community. Despite their scruffy appearance, the Cro-Magnon were as intelligent and sophisticated as you or—son, please don't lick the cave. That can't be good for either of you."

Ten-year-old Jason Jeter, about whom few things weren't piggish, had licked his way through a three week tour of France. He had licked the D-Day Memorial at Normandy, the tomb of Napoleon, the Plexiglas that covered the Mona Lisa. Now he was licking the historic caves of Lascaux. "Why's it taste so sweet?" Jason oinked.

"Bat droppings. Now, if you'll follow me, I'll show you a sight once reserved for the gods," said Oswald, herding them deeper into a tiny chamber in the rock. Above their heads was a breathtaking mural: a thickly muscled bison snorting as he charged, deer skittering in all directions, an explosion of brightly colored spirals and polka dots, and a single handprint, the signature of the long-forgotten artist. "The colors are just as vibrant, the animals just as animated as they were when first painted, over thirty-five thousand years ago. In order to preserve the mural, we ask that you not take any flash—" Oswald saw a sudden burst of bright light. It might have been a flashbulb. It might have been his hangover.

I chewed on a small twig, fashioning it into a fine paintbrush, and softened the shading on the bison's flanks. Perfect. I dipped my hand into a dish of ground charcoal and pressed it against the cave wall, signing my masterpiece. With proper care, I believed my mural could look good for five, maybe six years.

My name's Murf, and I'm an artist. I make a living carving decorative

tools for cooking and hunting, and sculpting voluptuous "fertility goddesses" for lonely bachelors. This cave mural was my first big commission; upon completion, the shaman of our tribe would pay me enough meat to get me through the winter, plus a big fat bag of cowrie shells. These shells have no intrinsic value, but we've begun to trade them for goods and services. It's a pretty good idea—I just hope it doesn't get out of control.

The shaman entered to pass judgment on my work. He studied it carefully, pursed his lips, and proclaimed, "It needs . . . me."

"What?"

"These animals are all very cute and lively, but I think I belong in the picture. I am the leader and spirit of our tribe—shouldn't I be here as well?"

Frankly, no. In all modesty, it was a beautiful painting, and there was no place for a human figure in it. Especially not the shaman's figure—he was shaped like the bladder of a bear and had the equivalent looks, intellect, and aroma.

"Murf—I demand that you put me in this painting." I sighed and drew a tiny stick figure at the rear of the bison. It could be the shaman although it might easily be mistaken for a bison chip.

The shaman purpled. "If you won't put me in this painting with the honor I'm due, I will find an artist who will! And you will receive nothing for all your hard work!"

No meat. No bag of shells. And my masterpiece would still be ruined. I thought long and hard before I replied. "Sit on your hat." This is about the worst thing you can say to a shaman, since his hat consists of a pair of large and very pointy ibex horns.

I called for my assistant Poot to gather all my paints, brushes, and tools. Dear Poot—strong as a horse, loyal as a dog, dumb as an ox—glared at the shaman from his deep-set eyes. "You stinky bad," he said.

"Well put, Poot," I said.

Oswald Plummer held up Poot's fossilized skull, with its bony eyebrow ridge and apelike jaw. "This is the skull of Neanderthal man, an evolutionary dead end. Can you imagine a race straining so hard to be human, and yet falling ever so short?"

The Jeter family stared at him glassily. "Yes, perhaps you could. We found this one skull mixed among the remains of all the Cro-Magnon. How profoundly lonely to be living among strangers, the very last of your race—"

"Is there a gift shop down here?" Mr. Jeter interrupted.

"No, Mr. Jeter, this is a cave."

It had been a tough day, so Poot and I treated ourselves to a trip to Mog's Tavern. Mog dispensed the juice of fermented grains from giant

vats under the sign IF YOU GO BLIND, YOU DON'T PAY. Mog's had always attracted the more artistic members of our tribe—already at the bar sat Qaqaq, an aspiring painter whose parents had forced him into the more stable field of toothpulling and exorcism.

"Murf!" came a voice from behind me—Mog's is a place where everybody knows your name. I turned to see Hax, the least original and hence most successful artist in our village. His bulbous body was stuffed into a doeskin outfit dotted with clumps of bunny fur scented and dyed with mashed lilacs; this gave Hax the look of a flowering shrub that was somehow sweating profusely. "Murf, I just had to tell you. I've been asked to do some work on that lovely cave painting you couldn't finish," he said.

"It is finished," I growled.

"Well, I'm just adding a few little touches. I thought I'd paint the shaman in so he's *riding* that cute bison you did. And I'm adding another giant portrait of the shaman on the left side, and guess what he's holding in his outstretched hand!"

"Your peepee?" Poot guessed in all sincerity.

Hax ignored him. "It's that herd of deer you painted. Oh, and I'm covering some of those spirals and dots you did with trees. People love trees."

I was speechless. Qaqaq, the young artist, came to my defense. "Hax, how can you do this?"

"They're offering me a huge bag of shells. I'm sure you'd do the same, Quackquack," Hax sneered.

Poot giggled. "Quackquack."

Mog stepped in. "You know, Haxy, since you're coming into a little cash, maybe you could finally pay off your bar tab."

Hax took out a swatch of chamois hide and on it drew a quick charcoal sketch of a tree. "Consider this payment in full," he said and drifted out of the bar like a ball of swamp gas.

Mog looked at the sketch, assessed it, then used it to mop up the bar top. "It does the job," he said.

Hours later Poot and I staggered out of Mog's, wittier and more charming than when we had entered. Poot hauled my heavy case of art supplies all the way to my home and heaved it inside. I had lost the biggest commission of my career, and I would have to let Poot go, too. I patted his lumpy head and gave him three shells' severance pay. He deserved more, but Poot's brain couldn't seem to handle any numbers beyond three. For him it goes one, two, three, more than you can ever imagine. Of course, the wise men of our tribe have found that numbers actually go all the way up to sixty before spinning off into uncountability.

I entered my cave to face the toughest challenge of this just awful day: Mother. In her time my mother has been attacked by packs of wolves

and had her head gnawed by a bear; she has pried snake fangs out of her breast and a boar's tusk from her thigh. As a sign of respect each defeated animal seems to have infused her with its own brand of meanness and cunning. Now, at age forty-eight, Mother has earned another title: The Oldest Woman on Earth.

"Mother, I lost my job today," I told her. I explained how I stood my ground against the shaman, how I put my integrity above mere material objects. It was a terrific speech, and I seemed quite the hero until I stepped forward and tripped over my case of art supplies.

The Oldest Woman on Earth regarded me with her one good eye and asked, "How will we eat?"

She had me there—I had no money, no food, no real prospects. "Mother, tomorrow I will go out and kill us something big." She snorted in a way that could never be interpreted as "I believe in you, my brave boy" and went to sleep. I spread out some straw for my bed and was out like a torch.

That night I dreamt I was naked and drowning and being eaten by snapping turtles. Even though I was underwater, my hair was on fire, and the first girl I'd ever kissed was laughing at me. What I awoke to see was even more disturbing. The Oldest Woman on Earth was standing astride me, a spear pointed between my eyes. "Yaah!" I remarked.

She tossed me the spear. "Go kill us some lunch."

"Fine. Just let me get a few more hours—" Before I could finish, T.O.W.O.E. had already swept my straw bed into the flaming cooking pit in the center of the cave. Cruel but tidy—that's my mom.

I strode off alone into the woods, my spear in hand. The last time I went hunting, I was twelve years old. Deep in the forest I had turned and found myself nose to nose with a woolly rhinoceros. He licked my face, and I fainted dead away. When I came to, I resolved to become an artist. I had never picked up a spear again until this day.

I spotted a reindeer grazing in the distance. With all the strength I could summon, I hurled my spear. It landed so far from its target the reindeer lazily turned to me with a look that said, "You weren't aiming for me, were you? You *couldn't* have been aiming for me." Then he strolled off, extra slowly as if to mock me.

I turned to my next victim, a not terribly large ibex. I threw my spear, and it lodged squarely in his shoulder. This didn't kill him or even seem to hurt him—this had offended him. He charged me. I ran. He knocked me down. He kicked me and butted me, and when that got boring, he began whacking me with the spear handle, still stuck in his shoulder. Finally, in a fit of ibexy conscience, he let me go. I was beaten, bruised, and soaked with blood, some his, mostly mine.

As I trudged home that evening, I spotted a squirrel gasping on the ground after a bad fall. I conked him on the head with a rock—at least I wouldn't have to face T.O.W.O.E. empty-handed. I entered my cave

holding my puny trophy by the tail. "Mother, I know that this may not look like much, but if you add a few vegetables—" At this point the squirrel, not dead but merely dazed, sprang to life. It bit my hand, did two quick laps around our home, chirping and peeing on everything in sight, and sprinted out the door.

I wished for anything to break the sticky silence that hung between my mother and myself—and I got it. The shaman entered my cave and proclaimed, "Murf, in the name of our people, I accuse you of murder!"

I was stunned. "For the squirrel?"

"For Hax, the artist." He explained that earlier that day, as Hax set to work repainting my mural, an unseen assailant had entered the sacred cave. There were signs of a struggle, and Hax had been stabbed in the heart.

"Well, surely you don't suspect *me*." As I gestured at myself, I remembered that I was covered with bruises and my clothes were soaked with blood. I started to explain that I'd been hunting alone all day, but that didn't even sound believable to me. No one had seen me go hunting for fifteen years.

The shaman produced a bloodstained utility knife the length of a man's foot; the bone handle was an intricately carved horse in full gallop. "This is the knife that killed Hax—its fine craftsmanship indicates only you could have made it."

"Well . . . yes," I said, flattered. It was a terrible situation, but I take my compliments where I can get them. "But I've made these for several customers. I kept one knife for myself, and that's not it. Mine is right here with my art supplies." I smugly opened my case and fished around inside: no knife. "Look, I know this looks bad, and I really regret my 'sit on your hat' remark—"

"I have judged the evidence and find you guilty of Hax's murder," said the shaman. "Tomorrow at dawn you will be stoned to death by the good people of this village." He clapped his hands, and two of the strongest men in our tribe, Oof and Bubo, grabbed me roughly by the shoulders. As they dragged me away, I saw a look in my mother's eyes I had never seen before. I think it was pride.

Oswald Plummer and the Jeter family stood above a perfectly round hole in the limestone, four feet wide, fifteen feet deep. "We believe a whirlpool created this hole naturally. However, etchings inscribed in the walls near the bottom indicate it had some ceremonial function—a repository for bones or holy relics, a place to contact the spirits of the earth. . . . But it most certainly was not a urinal!"

"Sorry," said Jason Jeter, zipping his pants.

I was thrown down into the Hole of the Gods to await execution. The hole was too deep and its sides too slick to climb out. The walls were

scratched with the names of other inmates who'd done time in the hole. There were even multiple listings for Zaza the prostitute; Lu the male prostitute; and my dear departed dad, I'm sorry to say.

Who killed Hax, I wondered, and why? Perhaps he was killed to avenge my honor or protect my work. Could Mother have done this? No, it had to be someone who loved me. And that's when I realized who the killer was. I called up to my captors. "Oof, Bubo, get Poot!" What a strange sentence, I thought as I heard it echo off the walls of the hole.

About an hour later Poot appeared at the edge of my hole. He was red-faced and snot-covered—he'd clearly been sobbing. "Poot, I'm going to be killed tomorrow for something I didn't do."

"But you my only friend," he wailed. "Poot be all alone." It was true; there had once been a great many of his people, but they were wiped out by—let's say a lack of common sense. His father tried to mate with a bear. His dear mother got her tongue stuck to a glacier and died of exposure that winter. His uncle used a beehive as a pillow. And so on and so on.

"Poot, you were carrying my art supplies. Did you take my knife? Did you kill Hax?"

"He was bad to you. You are good man," said Poot, and he walked away. About an hour later a thick vine was lowered into the hole. I grabbed hold as Oof and Bubo hauled me out. "You can go," the shaman said. "Poot confessed."

I sat alone in my home, Poot's execution just hours away. Mother, who rarely left the cave, was already at the village center—she loved a public stoning and had been hoarding ten-pound "head-crackers" for just such an occasion. I poked at the dead embers in the cooking pit, stirring the ash hole, feeling like an ash hole myself. My best friend committed murder to defend my work. And then he confessed—he gave up his own life—just to save me. Most people considered Poot a brute, but there was an awful lot of nobility in that man.

All at once I felt something hard among the ashes—it was one of the pigment dishes from my supply case. Digging farther into the pit I found a charred paintbrush as well as a bent and blackened piece of bone—it was my utility knife! These objects must have spilled out of my supply case after my boozy pratfall over the bag; my dear half-blind mother swept them into the fire the next morning. So Poot hadn't stolen my knife. And he hadn't killed Hax.

I ran to the clearing at the heart of our village. My poor friend was tied up in the center surrounded by stone-waving villagers. "Stop the stoning!" I cried. "This man is innoc—" Bonk! A hefty rock hit me in the small of the back. I turned to see who threw it. "*Mo-ther*," I said reproachfully.

I asked Poot why he'd confessed. "If you die, I die. If I die, you live," he said. It was that simple. If I live to be forty, I'll never see another such selfless act.

I showed the shaman my charred knife. "You'll need more than that to stop the execution," the shaman told me. "This is what these people live for. It's good for morale, and it's good for business." Indeed, almost every merchant in the tribe was there peddling his wares—Grop the meatseller, Kuff the potter, Zaza and Lu representing the world's youngest profession, Qaqaq the dentist-exorcist-artist . . . that's when it all became clear to me. "People of the village," I cried, "in one hour I will produce the true murderer. I ask only your kind forbearance—" Bonk! Another rock hit me. She had a good arm for an old lady.

The shaman and I paid a visit to the one merchant not at the execution. When we arrived at the tavern, we found Mog curled up in the corner, drunk on his own wares. I had realized that Mog would never have missed a stoning; he could sell more ale in an afternoon than he ordinarily would in a month. A search behind the bar turned up a bloody tunic and the big bag of cowrie shells that was to be my pay, and then Hax's. "I just went to Hax to collect on his bar tab. I mean, it was *huge*," Mog confessed. "He was holding this big bag of shells, but he wouldn't part with any of 'em. We argued, he pushed me . . . I stabbed him." The knife Mog used was one I had given him years ago, to pay off *my* bar tab. There's a lesson in there somewhere.

Justice is swift in my little village. Within twelve hours the shaman had sentenced three different men to death for the same murder. Mog was taken back to the clearing for execution. Poot was set free and even allowed to throw the first stone. The shaman, apologizing for my wrongful conviction, awarded me ownership of Mog's Tavern. "And you can have this bag of cowrie shells as soon as you finish that cave painting."

"It's done," I said, grabbing the bag.

So now I'm a tavern owner, and Mother couldn't be prouder. Poot works for me, running the bar. As part of his policy no drink costs more than three shells. And I earn enough so that I can paint whatever I want, whenever I want, and no one can make me change it. My first project was a family portrait for the wall of my cave: inside a border of roses are me and The Oldest Woman on Earth. And I must say, Mother never looked more beautiful.

The Jeter family stared at the rose-framed picture on the cave wall. "What the ding-dong is this supposed to be?" asked Mrs. Jeter.

"Well, most scholars believe that this man is the artist," said Oswald Plummer pointing to one figure. "And this other one . . . well, it's some sort of demon, possibly a dragon."

A Terrible Storm

William T. Lowe

Ibroke my ankle the week before the Great Ice Storm, but I did what I could during the emergency. With a cast halfway up to my knee I couldn't handle a chain saw or drive a truck or run a backhoe, so I worked in the shelter the fire department had set up in the Fountain Town Hall.

As people were driven out of their houses by the storm, they were brought to the shelter; we assigned them cots and issued blankets. The women's auxiliary kept the kitchen open day and night. Since I used to be a deputy sheriff, I know most of the people on this side of the county, and I kept a log of names so relatives could find each other.

It snowed on Sunday, and a heavy freezing rain began on Monday. In hours everything was coated with ice. Twigs as small as pencils were encased in three inches of ice. Mature trees splintered and fell under tons of weight. In less than a day power lines were down, phones were out, roads were blocked from the Adirondacks far into Canada. There was a continuous barrage of noise—limbs tearing away from trunks and crashing into ice-coated underbrush.

By Tuesday the shelter was pretty well organized. The fire department had hooked up some generators to provide light. The Red Cross sent in cots and blankets and bot-

tled water. Without electricity, grocery stores had no refrigeration; they donated meat and produce and milk.

Fountain was dark and deserted. Schools were closed. The only traffic was work crews. The hardware store had been open but was out of batteries, flashlights, any kind of heaters. The Mobil station pumped gas with a standby generator until the underground tank ran dry. We had already had four inches of freezing rain.

Everybody knew what had to be done. Clear the roads so repair crews could reach downed power lines. Check the houses, transport people to the shelter. Watch for wires on the ground, stay clear of overhead branches. The fire department, the ambulance squad, the highway crews all worked double and triple shifts.

The Town Hall had a basketball court—that was where we set up some eighty cots. I slept that night in the clothes I had on, my cane and some aspirin for my ankle at hand. The rumble of generators outside and snoring and coughing inside didn't keep me awake.

Like the other small mountain towns we were isolated, but we were in good shape. We had radio contact with the police and hospitals; we had bottled water, kerosene, and the promise of oxygen tanks to-

morrow. The radio said the storm was not about to let up, but we were too tired to worry about it.

On the second day I logged in more people, those who had decided against staying at home without heat or lights or a telephone. Some-one brought in games and puzzles for the children. The women gravitated to the kitchen.

A Mrs. Julie Allen brought me a cup of coffee at my desk by the door and handed me a letter.

"Mr. Sessions," she said, "the Post Office is closed, and this letter can't go out. What can I do?"

I explained that because we were now a federal disaster area the mail trucks were not running. I put the letter in my pocket. "I'll mail it for you the first chance I get."

"Thank you, Mr. Sessions." She remembered something. "Oh, there's a check in it. It really should go registered, and I left home without my purse . . ."

"Don't worry. You can pay me back later." She thanked me again and headed for the kitchen. Before I put the letter in my pocket, I glanced at the address. Reverend Daniel Fisher, Church of the Sacred Word, a post office box in Orlando, Florida.

Mrs. Allen must have spread the word that I would be a substitute mail drop. That afternoon another lady asked me to mail a letter. It was addressed to the same Reverend Fisher in Orlando.

I was busy; I forgot about it. The shelter was also headquarters for the relief effort. Work crews came and went, clearing downed trees

and utility poles. One crew went through town pumping out flooded basements. As soon as Route 9 going south was open, the power company began trucking in tons of dry ice to be distributed here and in other small towns to people who wanted to maintain their home freezers.

The freezing rain continued, coating everything except workmen's faces and the warm hoods of trucks. Now there was the threat of flooding along the river. Volunteers began showing up from all over the county, asking what they could do to help. I paired them up with local crews.

"Are you sure we can't rent a car or something to get outa here?"

It was the man who called himself Charlie Silva. A road crew had found him and a companion stranded on Route 22 yesterday and had brought them in.

"No, Charlie, I'm afraid you're stuck here. Everything is grounded except emergency vehicles."

"Okay, okay," he said apologetically. "Just askin'."

"Don't worry about your car," I told him. "It's safe enough for now." The car was on a side road off the highway, and it would stay there because a thirty foot oak burdened by a ton of ice had fallen directly in front of it.

Silva was short, mid-twenties, black hair, dressed in sports clothes. He struck me as the type who would spend a lot of time on street corners and know a lot of baseball and football statistics. His girlfriend was named Elaine Hagen. She was younger, medium blonde,

with the neat manner and dress of a salesclerk. When I checked them in, Charlie told me they were from Garden City on Long Island and had been visiting in Montreal.

The next day Charlie had another question. "Who can I sue for letting that tree fall on me?"

"Why, nobody. It was an accident. And you didn't get hurt."

"We were both scared. That's mental anguish. Somebody must own that property. Somebody I can sue. I think we got a case here."

"No, you don't," I said. "Forget it."

He shook his head and turned away. Clearly I didn't understand the fine points of big city law.

Elaine Hagen helped out in the kitchen and gave some tired mothers a break by playing with their children. She was an attractive girl, but two things made me suspicious.

When she and Charlie Silva arrived at the shelter, Elaine was carrying a large cardboard box. She kept it with her everywhere she went. And she was on her way home from Canada.

There is a growing market for illegal copies of movie videos, music discs, and other copyrighted items. Most of the pirated merchandise comes across the Pacific and spreads east from California. It's sold on the street and in bars for a quarter of the legitimate price. Recently some of the blackmarket material has been smuggled down from Canada.

Five dozen knockoffs of an Oscar-winning movie or a chart-topping music single would fit into a large cardboard box.

I'd been watching for a National

Guard truck with a load of generators to be delivered to some dairy farms several miles out of town and had a vehicle standing by to show them the way. A young man named Jerry who used to be in my Scout troop would drive me. When the truck arrived, I hobbled out to the car.

I'd been indoors for a day and a half; I wasn't prepared for what hit me as we drove through the dark and deserted town into the countryside.

Huge trees, their branches gone, standing like grotesque sentinels. Young birch and alders bent double, their top branches ice-locked in the ground. Frozen underbrush shattering like glass as branches fell from trees. The strong smell of pine and cedar in the air like an invisible, cloying fog.

The Guard truck followed closely as we drove around piles of debris, watching for downed power and phone wires. I wanted to go faster; I knew the people on the dairy farms needed those generators desperately.

Without power for the pumps, the cattle couldn't be watered. Nor could they be milked on schedule as they should be. Without these elementary attentions the cows would sicken and die. The generators would save many animals, but the storm would take a terrible toll.

"Show me where they picked up that city couple," I said to Jerry on our way back. "I'm just curious."

Charlie Silva's car was a late model blue Pontiac sedan. It was on a short lane that led to an old barn, and it was blocked by a large fall-

en oak tree. "Pull over, Jerry," I said. "Take a look inside."

Jerry climbed over the tree and circled the car. "Nothing," he reported. "Doors locked, trunk locked. Nothing showing inside, not even a road map."

He got back in the car. "That guy is sure in a hurry to get out of here," Jerry commented. "He's going around offering fifty bucks to anyone with a saw to cut up that tree so he can get his car out."

On the way back I wondered why Silva had pulled off the main road in the first place, and on a lane that led only to an old barn.

By nightfall the phone company had patched a line into the Town Hall, and I used the phone to call a friend of mine at state police headquarters in Ray Brook. I had made a note of the license number of the Silva car, and I asked him to check it for me.

"You don't think we got enough to do?" he growled. "This storm's got us out straight, Hank."

But he did check the number. The blue Pontiac wasn't stolen. Neither was it registered to a Charles Silva of Garden City, Long Island.

I added the names of two old friends to my shelter roster, Courtney Smith and his wife Gloria. Limbs had blocked Court's driveway, and he had run out of fuel trying to saw them up. A big tree had fallen across the roof of the kitchen. And with no electricity for the heat tapes, the water pipes in his house and barn were freezing.

"The least of my problems, Hank," he said.

I knew what he meant. I helped them get settled and left them alone. They sat by themselves, talking quietly. The Smiths owned a hundred acres of maple trees; their livelihood was sugaring. They'd been counting on the syrup to send their two girls to college.

They had to watch helplessly as the weight of the ice destroyed tree after tree. Eight out of ten of their maples had been ruined, and the relentless storm continued through the night and the next three days.

My contact had said the blue Pontiac was owned by a Frank Gratto in Hempstead, Long Island. Hempstead is not far from Garden City. Casually I asked Elaine if she knew anybody named Frank Gratto.

"Sure," she answered. "That's Charlie's uncle. He gave us this trip to Montreal. He wanted Charlie to bring his car back for him, so we flew up and Uncle Frank paid for the tickets."

So Charlie was just doing a favor for an uncle who lived on Long Island but left his car in Montreal. An uncle who was suspected of racketeering and had three arrests for unlawful possession of a controlled substance.

Some people who had canned food and bottled water and firewood decided to ride out the storm at home. For a few it was an adventure, for others a tragedy.

In spite of the warnings, people used kerosene heaters in closed rooms; they put gasoline-powered generators in basements or on closed porches. Reports of carbon monoxide poisoning came from all

over. The first signs of poisoning, headaches and nausea, were usually ignored until it was too late.

Ted Rosenbaum, another friend of mine, was in charge of our evacuation detail. He had a crew going from door to door, to make sure any people at home were safe and to deliver food supplies. A large room at the rear of the building was operations center. Long tables were covered with raingear, battery radios, ice scrapers. Cigarette smoke layered the high ceiling.

Ted had a table against a wall and a tax list he had scrounged from the clerk's office. As I walked up, two men had just come in from outside, stamping the slush from their boots, shrugging out of their black raincoats.

"We hit every house on Grove Street," one of them told Ted. "And Separator Street is clear except for that old man at the end by the river. Want us to try him again?"

Ted shook his head. "You guys get something to eat. There's some mighty good stew today." He pointed at his map. "Then circle through the Jersey section in the morning." The men headed down the hall to the cafeteria. Ted looked at me. "That's old Caleb McCullen down by the river. You know him, don't you, Hank?"

"I know him. As stubborn as they come."

"Lives there alone, doesn't he?"

"Not quite alone," I said.

Ted was tracing the river on his map.

"There's an ice jam downstream here." He pointed. "The river keeps on coming up, nobody will get in

there tomorrow." He looked up at me. "You want to take a ride?"

I had my cap in a back pocket. I put it on and picked up one of the raincoats. "Let's go," I said. I wagged my cane. "You drive."

Ted had the keys to a four-wheel drive vehicle; we headed out of town toward the river. We passed a power company bucket truck and digger. The crew was installing a new service pole. I had heard that over a thousand utility poles were already down in the northern part of the county. Giant steel transmission towers had toppled over near the Canadian border.

Behind us we could hear chain saws snarling as we inched our way down Separator Street, named before the Civil War when the iron mines on Palmer Hill and the smelters by the river were working. The snap of limbs breaking and crashing on the underbrush sounded like small arms fire. Larger branches, weighted beyond endurance by the ice, broke away with an angry loud crack.

"Sounds like a mortar," Ted said.

"Yeah." I wondered where Ted had heard mortar fire. I'd have to ask him sometime.

The air was heavy with the scent of pine and cedar. The ground was thick with needles and twigs and small branches. I hope we don't have a dry summer, I thought; this will be tinder for a heck of a fire.

Caleb McCullen lived in an old trailer on the bank of the river. To reach it we drove down a dirt lane that dropped down from the paved road. Ted stopped the car, and we looked at the river, already out of

its bank and foaming whitely in the dim light.

"That water keeps comin' up, it'll take out this road by morning," Ted said. "You better talk that old man into comin' out with us now."

A yellow light shone from a small window. I knocked on the door, heard a voice inside, and walked in, Ted behind me. Caleb stood in the center of the room, a bent old man who looked closer to ninety than seventy. A woodstove in a corner threw some heat, but it was cold in the room. An oil lamp on a table was the only light.

Caleb looked at us in alarm, but his expression softened as he recognized me. "How do, Henry," he said almost formally.

"You're welcome to come in and set, Henry," Caleb said to me, "but I know why you're here and I'll tell you like I told those people yestiddy..." He straightened as much as his back would allow. "I ain't goin' to leave my place here, no, sir!"

I knew he was stubborn, and I wasn't about to argue with him. "That's all right, Caleb," I said pleasantly. "You can stay here if you want to. I came to fetch Chester."

"Chester?" He looked at me in surprise. "What do you want with him?"

Chester was Caleb's dog, a little cocker spaniel, the only thing in the world the old man had to love, and to be loved by. I made a show of searching around the room, looking behind the only armchair, under the skirt of the table.

"I'm not going to see Chester maybe drown or starve to death," I said over my shoulder. "Now, where is he?"

I saw Caleb's eyes go toward the woodbox by the stove. As I crossed the room, Caleb moved to stop me.

"You can't take him, Henry! You got no right!"

"Yes, I do, Caleb. I'm still an officer of the law, you know. I won't stand by and see a crime committed. I'm taking your dog to the shelter in town where he'll be safe. You can stay here if you want to."

The little dog was in a box behind the stove. Its hind legs were withered sticks, the result of a long-ago accident. Caleb had found the dog beside the road minutes after a car had run over his hindquarters, crushing his legs. Caleb had cared for the dog, and later he fashioned a two-wheel cart and harness with which the dog could pull himself around.

I stooped to pick Chester up. "Find me a blanket to wrap him in," I said.

Caleb stopped me with a hand on my shoulder.

"Wait, Henry! They told me I couldn't keep him with me in town," Caleb said, his voice ragged with panic. "He's all I got, Henry, you know that!" His voice cracked. "He needs me!"

"I know, Caleb." I touched his shoulder. "Listen to me. They were wrong. You can keep him with you at the shelter." From close by outside I heard the snap and crash of another tree falling. From the door Ted said, "We best be going, Hank."

Caleb straightened up, the little dog in his arms. "Do I have your word on that, Henry?"

"You do. Now, let's go before the river takes out your road here."

"All right then." Caleb put on an old overcoat and wrapped Chester in a wool sweater. He handed me the little cart and harness. To Ted, standing by the door, he said, "We're ready, sir." To me he said, "We thank you, Henry."

When we got back, I had a message to call Sergeant Early in Ray Brook. I had to wait for the phone. There was only one line, and people in the shelter were using it to contact relatives on the outside, but I finally got him.

"You still got that '94 Pontiac out there in the boonies? The one the city boy was driving?"

"Yes, Vern, it's still here."

"Keep your eyes on it." He paused. "I can't tell you much, buddy, but Customs and BCI picked up on the description and the plate of that car. I don't know why they're interested, but they are. I told them it was over there in Fountain and you had seen it, all right?"

"Sure. It won't go anywhere; it's blocked by a big tree."

"Don't do anything to get the guy suspicious. We'll get back to you." And he hung up.

As I walked down the hall to the kitchen, the ceiling light came on. I didn't realize what had happened until I heard people cheering all over the building. We had light! The electric company had restored service to this part of town.

We were still prisoners of the storm, but part of our sentence had been lifted.

By noon the next day I had been entrusted with four more envelopes addressed to a Reverend Daniel

Fisher in Orlando. I was suspicious. I recalled the mail scams I'd heard of—you have won a fabulous prize, an uncle you never heard of left you some priceless real estate, all you have to do is send us your life savings.

What did I know about the people who had written the letters? They were all elderly, the ideal targets for a mail fraud, all members of Saint Agnes Church in town. Not much to go on, but my friend Ted was also a member of Saint Agnes.

"You happen to get a letter from a Reverend Fisher down in Florida?" I asked Ted over coffee.

"Yeah. Felt sorry for that old missionary he wrote about. Dying of cancer like that. I was going to send a few bucks, but I got busy."

I tried to be casual. "Something about needing an operation, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. Big medical bills. The old man was booked into Sloan-Kettering for an operation but needed payment in advance. Plus airfare."

"Reverend Fisher's church is in Orlando, right?"

"He said it was a small church. Just getting started. Not in the official register yet."

I didn't say anything. Of course it wouldn't be listed.

Dolls. The box Elaine was so careful of contained a dozen or so new dolls. I happened to walk through the dining room as she was showing them to a circle of delighted children and parents. The dolls were cute little figures of animals and people, soft plush bodies and endearing expressions.

"You've got your Barbies and your Kens," Elaine was saying, "and your Barney's and Cabbage Patch Kids and your Elmos, but now—" she held up two of the dolls "—here's the new thing in dolls, the new collectible . . . the Beanie Baby!"

She handed one to me. It was a little fox about ten inches long, brown and white with little button eyes. A heart-shaped tag in the one ear said his name was Sly, and there was a little poem about him.

"They don't talk or snore or dress up," Elaine told the mothers. "They just cuddle, and they're inexpensive enough so you can have lots of them. There's Dotty the Dalmatian and Mel the Otter and Stinky the Skunk and Percy the Goose . . ."

The Beanie Babies were trademarked. Their popularity made them obvious targets for illegal imitating, and it would take an expert to tell whether these were genuine. I asked Elaine what she planned to do with the dolls.

"They're for display in the shop where I work," she told me. "Then I'll use them for birthday presents." She smiled. "Don't worry, Mr. Sessions, I know about trademark infringement; I wouldn't sell bootleg stuff."

I was getting worried about the people in the shelter. They were getting restless, and it was depressing to realize that the cleanup after the storm would take months. Men worked outside if they were able. Women kept the kitchen open, improvised a laundry, fretted about the homes they'd had to leave.

All of us were afraid the ice sheet would ruin the spring alfalfa crop.

Eight miles of transmission lines were still down just north of here. There were more reports of flooding. The governor called for emergency funding. The latest count of people without power was over a hundred thousand in five counties.

There were many stories of wild-life suffering—deer injured by falling limbs, trapped in deep snow, starving because their food was encased in ice.

We were running short of milk and bread, the two things we usually took for granted. But we had plenty of volunteers. The Red Cross had people from far away as California.

Then Father Joe Doyle did something to relieve the gloom. He offered hot showers to one and all.

The rectory was only a three block walk from the shelter. During the storm Father Joe had stayed at the rectory, saying that people knew they could find him there if he was needed. The farm supply store set him up with a big generator for power and bottled gas for his water heater.

The offer of a hot shower was a big morale boost, even with a five minute time limit and bring your own towel. I was signing up people for it when I was called to the phone.

It was my friend Sergeant Early. "About your Reverend Daniel Fisher, Hank. He is a minister; he does have a correspondence school degree. He runs mail scams out of his home in Orlando. Always uses the religion angle to ask for money. He's been tagged twice."

"How does he get his prospects' names?"

"He works a computer to get magazine subscription lists. Sometimes he snags the names of credit card holders."

I thought about the letters in my pocket. "The people he reached up here all belong to a garden club."

"There you are. Maybe they all take the same magazine. Or maybe their names were on a seed catalogue mailing list. Whatever. Tell your friends to save their money."

"Right. Thanks, Vern."

As I hung up, I glanced out the window. The rain had changed to snow. That had to be a good sign. Maybe we could close the shelter soon.

What I wanted to do now was get the cast off my ankle. What I didn't want to do was hand those letters back and tell the people they had been suckered by a scam artist in Florida.

"Where's Charlie?"

"He's gone to pick up our car," Elaine said. "Somebody told him a highway crew cut up that big tree."

"How did he go?"

"I think he caught a ride with a truck going to Malone."

I looked through the rooms of the shelter. No Ken, no Jerry. I hobbled to the rear of the building and looked over our motor pool. Only two pickups in sight. The first one had a stick shift; with my leg I couldn't manage that. The second one was automatic, and the key was in the ignition. Thankfully, the windshield was clear of ice.

I used the edge of the pickup's roof to haul myself up and levered my leg inside with my cane. Somebody

yelled as I drove away, but there was no time for explanations.

The side road where Charlie Silva's car was trapped was about ten minutes north on Route 22. On the side of the highway a line of fresh stumps followed the path of the power poles.

The snow had stopped, but the sky was threatening again. What had happened five days ago was that a low pressure front had stalled directly over northern New York. High pressure Arctic air had funneled down to meet a jetstream loaded with warm tropical air from the Gulf. We got an instant Ice Age. The last thing we needed now was more snow.

I wanted some answers from Charlie Silva. I didn't think he would leave the area without taking Elaine with him. And she was back in the shelter; he would have to pass me to get there.

The oak tree had been cut into sections and dragged aside. I turned down the lane and stopped in front of the blue Pontiac. Charlie was trying to scrape the ice and snow off the windshield and windows.

He was surprised to see me.

"Morning, Mr. Sessions," he said cheerfully. He went on with his scraping.

"You weren't going to leave without saying goodbye, were you, Charlie?"

"Oh no. I thought I'd catch you when I went back to pick up Elaine. I think we can get out of here today."

The front door of the old barn was about ten yards away. I saw tracks

in the snow from the car to the barn, but I assumed Charlie had gone in to look around. I walked around the car, trying to see in the windows.

Casually I asked, "Frank Gratto isn't really your uncle, is he, Charlie?"

"No," he admitted. "He's a guy I do things for sometimes."

"Jobs like picking up this car in Montreal?"

He nodded.

"Where'd you pick it up? In a body shop?"

He stopped and looked at me. "So what if I did?"

"It must have been in a body shop, Charlie," I said lightly. "You ever notice that the upholstery on the doors is different from the seats?"

"So what if it is?" He wasn't cheerful now. "And what's with the questions anyway?"

I turned to face him. "And why would a young couple driving south from Montreal to Long Island turn off the highway and stop in front of this old barn?"

Charlie looked around uneasily. The sky was overcast and promised more snow. The barn was to his left, the ruins of the oak tree to his right, my truck blocked the way to the main road. He realized he was afoot and with no place to go.

"I'll tell you what I think, Charlie," I went on. "Somebody working with Frank Gratto hid something in this car. Something illegal. And when they were ready to send it across the border, Uncle Frank sent you to drive it down."

I waved my cane at the old barn. "I think you were supposed to meet

someone here, Charlie. Were you going to switch cars or unload this one? Too bad the weather turned sour on you."

He didn't say anything; he wouldn't look at me. I changed the subject. "That Elaine is such a nice girl. Is she in on the deal?"

That surprised him; he shook his head. "Nah. She's just my girlfriend. She works in a gift shop."

I knew Charlie had used the telephone in the shelter. Part of my theory was that he had been asking for instructions.

"What did Uncle Frank tell you to do when the storm is over?"

He shrugged. "The deal's off. Take the car back."

"That's not what's going to happen," said a man's voice behind me.

I shouldn't have let him sneak up on me. He must have seen my truck, left his car on the main road, and walked down. He wouldn't have made any noise in the snow.

I turned; he was standing a few feet away. In his early forties, dark, muscular, wearing cold weather gear and a red hunting cap that looked very out of place.

"Stand easy, Pop." His right hand was in his pocket. I had no doubt as to what he was holding.

To Charlie the man said, "All right, kid, so we were real late that day. Lousy weather. Time we got here you were gone, and we didn't know how to move that friggin' tree."

"Sure, okay, that's all right," Charlie said nervously.

The man took his hand out of his pocket, holding a black automatic that looked like a .38. He pointed it at me.

"Now, here's what we do. Kid, you move Pop's truck out of the way and give me the keys to the car here. Then you go down the road and hitch a ride someplace outa here."

To me he said, "Pop, you forget you ever saw . . ."

Some forty years ago in this part of the forest a young white pine seedling grew proud and straight. It grew taller each year, giving shelter to animals, sanctuary to birds, shade to the barn. Then a week ago the forest was ravaged by a catastrophic ice storm. The pine withstood the assault for days and finally—now—a mighty limb split away with a loud report.

The man was startled; he turned to look as the limb crashed to the ground a few yards away. There was time enough to reverse my cane, take one step, and bring it down on his wrist. The gun fell into the snow at my feet.

The man gasped and clutched his arm. "You old bastard!"

"Watch your mouth, creep," someone said. "What's going to happen is you're going to jail."

Two men had appeared from the door of the barn. They both looked like lawmen, and they both held pistols.

"Never mind, Mr. Sessions," one man said, "we'll take over. I'm Ben Wilkins, U.S. Customs. We know who you are."

The other man said, "Harold Page, BCI. Thanks for your help."

I leaned against the Pontiac and took several deep breaths as the agent named Page put handcuffs on Red Cap, the man I had hit. To

Charlie he said, "You're under arrest, too."

"Yes, sir," Charlie said in a weak voice. He looked confused. Until now I had been just a nosy old man who worked in the shelter. Then all at once I had neutralized a muscle man and plainclothes cops were calling me by name.

Wilkins was talking on a cell phone. "We've got the car and a couple of errand boys. Come on in and pick us up. And hurry up; it's cold out here."

He offered me a thermos of coffee, and I took it gratefully. "We had a state highway crew cut up that tree first thing this morning, and we staked out the car. The chief said give it a day and then tow the damn car to the impound lot in Malone. But I thought somebody would show up sooner or later." He shivered. "I'm glad it was sooner."

As casually as I could, I asked Page, "So I was right about the car?"

He nodded. "We knew this meet was going down, and we were going to crash the party. We picked up the car at Champlain and followed it here, but the storm screwed everything up."

"What's in it?" I asked. It had to be something important to have two agencies working on it. I knew narcotics generally move from south to north and that payment comes back through Canada into the States. "Money?" I guessed.

"We don't know for sure until we take the car apart, but if our contact gave us the straight dope, there's a hundred thousand dollars in counterfeit hundreds in there. The new hundreds."

Two cars showed up on the highway, and several men got out. I gave one the keys to the truck, and he moved it out of the way. They put Charlie in one car, Red Cap in another. Agent Wilkins drove me back to town.

I asked him about the two young people, Elaine and Charlie.

"The girl was just window dressing. Charlie? If he doesn't have a record, they'll probably let him go. Nobody should be that dumb."

The great storm was over. There had been countless instances of neighbor helping neighbor, of kindnesses by strangers, of the vitality of small communities. Medium security prisons had opened their gates to give shelter to storm refugees and sent inmates out on clean-up details. A caravan of forty cars and trucks from Plattsburgh drove over icy roads to deliver cords of firewood to two beleaguered towns in Quebec.

It was Saturday and Father Joe and I were watching Jerry and some others load the last of the cots on a truck to be returned to storage. We were closing the shelter, and we

were anxious to get home and assess the storm damage.

I explained the Florida situation to Father Joe and said I was in a bit of a hurry. He took the hint.

"I'll be glad to return the letters for you," he said. "Will the police be able to prosecute this man for trying to cheat people that way?"

"They'll try. He's been convicted of intent to defraud before. You might caution Mrs. Allen and the others to be very careful of requests for money that come in the mail," I said. "There are ways to check them out."

"I will, Hank."

I handed him the letters I'd been holding. Father Joe put them in his pocket and looked at me with a little grin. "I guess you saved me some money, too, Hank."

He took an envelope out of a pocket and showed me the address. It was the familiar Reverend Daniel Fisher in Orlando.

"This can be our little secret, all right?"

"Sure thing, Father Joe."

"Take care of that leg."

I went home. It had been a terrible storm, but as I saw it, things could be worse.

A Narrow Squeak

Lawrence Doorley

All tales have a beginning ("In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth"; "Call me Ishmael"; "It was a dark and stormy night"). This tale—a tale of murder gone awry—may be said to have its beginning on a lovely summer morning in 1942 in Hillsdale, the county seat of Ashford County in the Appalachian foothills of southwestern Pennsylvania.

Six-month-old Elizabeth Watson, a chubby blonde darling, was having a wonderful time playing with her toys in her playpen in the back yard when a wee intruder appeared. Just out of the nest, exploring the great big world for the very first time, a meadow mouse (*M. pennsylvanicus*) hopped into the playpen squeaking baby mouse noises.

Oh, oh, oh, a new toy and it makes funny noises, thought Elizabeth happily. She grabbed it, squeezed it tightly in her baby fist. The squeaks became shrill squeals as the frightened mouse fought to free itself from the clutches of this monster. It made it. It ran up the baby's arm, leaped onto her blonde head, began digging frantically.

Elizabeth screamed. Her mother, who had been keeping a watchful eye on her from the back porch swing, flew down the steps, ran to the playpen, swatted the mouse so hard that it landed twenty feet away. Squeaking pathetically, it ran

for home, a lesson learned: it's a dangerous world out there.

The mouse hadn't broken the skin, but it left a permanent scar. That terrifying experience marked Elizabeth for life. She was petrified of mice, an incurable musophobia, haunted by musophobia, one of over two hundred phobias (fears) listed in psychiatric dictionaries. Others are ailurophobia (fear of cats; Bunny Ainsworth—she who was once plain Elizabeth Watson—loves cats; they catch mice), and phasmophobia (fear of ghosts).

Bunny is not alone. There are thousands of women and who knows how many men who, given the choice, would take a cackling ghost in the attic to a squeaking mouse in the bedroom. It is unlikely that anyone has ever died of musophobia or phasmophobia. Let us hope not; there are already enough goofy ways to die. And Elizabeth "Bunny" Watson Ainsworth didn't die of her phobia. But it was close, a narrow squeak.

The tale moves to a casino in Las Vegas, the date September seventh, 1993. Lady Luck, a fickle creature who had fallen under the spell of that charming scoundrel Tony Gregory, abruptly deserted him for another scoundrel, and by the time Tony realized that his luck had run out, the casino had two hundred

twenty thousand dollars' worth of his markers (casino I.O.U.'s).

Back in the primitive 1930's when all gambling was illegal—and sinful—when the riffest of the riffraff controlled it, a Tony Gregory would have been in serious trouble. Oh, he would have been given a couple of weeks to pay up “or else.” A standard “or else” involved concrete shoes and the nearest body of water.

My, how the world has changed. Gambling flourishes, is legal in forty-eight states (the two sanctimonious holdouts are Utah and Hawaii), is enveloped in a halo of respectability. States have their own lotteries; casinos are managed by MBA's from prestigious universities and are highly regarded by mutual funds, but like their illegitimate forebears, they are in business to make money. When you lose—especially if you are a premium player like Tony Gregory (premium players number thousands, wager a hundred thousand to two hundred thousand dollars per visit)—you are expected to pay up. In Tony's case the casino was “lenient”; he was given a year, charged a modest eight point seventy-five percent interest.

But if by September seventh, 1994, the markers were still unpaid, the casino would reluctantly institute legal proceedings to collect—reluctantly because the gaming industry does not like to admit that now and then a player loses. Being sued would devastate Tony. His name would be posted in casinos not only in Las Vegas but in Atlantic City, London, Monte Carlo, everywhere. Losing his good name, publicly branded a welsher, his markers

not worth the paper they were written on, was unthinkable.

“It'd kill me,” he moaned time after time as the weeks flew by, the outlook growing worse. “Like the fellow says, if you lose your good name, you're done, finished, kaput. Think what Big Mo and Vince and Slim and all the other fellows would say. I let them down, made it tougher for them to give markers.”

For the record, the fellow who first placed a high value on one's good name was The Preacher, son of David. In Ecclesiastes 7:1 he spoke: “A good name is more precious than ointment.” Shakespeare agreed. “Who steals my purse steals trash, but he who filches from me my good name leaves me poor indeed.”

By June 1994 Tony Gregory was a miserable human. Not only was disgrace looming ever closer, but he was undergoing excruciating withdrawal symptoms, for he was hopelessly addicted to the whirl of the wheel, the turn of the cards, the throw of the dice.

He was living incognito in a New Jersey motel on the cash from his last pawnshop transaction (a diamond ring he had taken as collateral for a four thousand dollar loan made to a rich playboy who finally ran out of money, never redeemed the ring). His only remaining asset was a jeweled watch (six thousand five hundred dollars F.O.B. Fifth Avenue, New York City, on a trip there to celebrate a big winning streak back in 1990).

He had been frequenting the lobbies of the luxurious New York hotels in a desperate search for a rich

widow, any rich woman. But his bad luck continued.

Then, because of a noble gesture, his luck changed. It happened when he was on the way to Pittsburgh to visit the legendary Pittsburgh Will, famous as the player who broke the bank at Monte Carlo way back in 1934. Tony had lost track of Will, assumed he was long gone. Imagine his amazement while listlessly watching a TV program called "Old Age Is Getting Older" to see Will about to be interviewed, the occasion Will's one hundred fifth birthday.

If the announcer hadn't said that "our next guest is the famous Pittsburgh Will, a legend in gambling circles," Tony would never have recognized the frail, wizened little man.

In a wheelchair, a nurse hovering behind, Will was ready, the nurse indicated. So was the smiling interviewer, a svelte young female whip-snapper not a day over forty.

"How does it feel to be all of a hundred and five?" she asked old Will in a throaty, gushy voice.

"Rotten," croaked Will, "it stinks." Oops. Silence. Loud silence.

Then, "Now, you don't mean that, do you?" asked the interviewer gamely.

"The hell I don't," rasped Will. "Wait'll you get to be a hundred and five. It ain't no picnic." Cringing, the interviewer gave up.

"Thank you," she somehow managed, "and happy birthday! We now switch to Topeka, Kansas, where Jim has a ninety-two-year-old spry youngster who still drives her 1981 Pontiac to the mall every Thursday. Over to you, Jim."

"Thank you, Carol," said Jim, a

handsome fellow. "That was great. Yes, we do have . . ."

That was enough for Tony. He hit the remote, a terrible, sad feeling having enveloped him. Wow, poor old Will, he was the best, and look at him now. It's a damned rotten world.

He spent a gloomy night. Next morning he had a sudden thought. Why not send old Will a birthday card, cheer him up? He went to a nearby mall, spent a good half hour trying to find a card appropriate to the unique occasion. He finally picked an All Occasion Birthday Card. It depicted a family outing involving three or four generations. It was summer, everyone was happy; the theme, it's great to be alive.

Back at the motel Tony phoned the nursing home, got the address, mailed the card to Will ("Hang in there, old pal; you can still beat the odds"), pretty proud of himself. A week later he received a note from the nursing home.

"Will says thanks for the card, Mr. Gregory," it read, "and he asks if it isn't too much trouble if you could come to see him, before, as he puts it, he cashes in his chips. And if I may add a word, Mr. Gregory, I hope you can come. Will is a sad, weak old man not long for this world, and not one single person has ever visited him in the twelve years he has been here. Do try to come."

The note was signed, "Thelma, head nurse, day shift."

Tony reread the note five or six times, getting more misty-eyed each time. Finally he grabbed a handful of tissues, wiped his eyes, blew his nose, picked up the phone, booked a first-class seat on the nine forty-five

A.M. flight from LaGuardia to Pittsburgh for the following day.

As that other fellow (Gaius Petronius, A.D. c. 66) has told us, "One good turn deserves another." Bunny Ainsworth was on the plane in the seat next to Tony. Bunny was fifty-two, a slender, well-preserved, good-looking widow whose bookish birdwatching husband Harold had died tragically five years before, having fallen into an abandoned stone quarry a moment after his greatest birdwatching feat, snapping a picture of a rare Chippendale Vermillion. ("Vivid colors; scarlet head, yellow belly, blue tail. Seldom seen in North America.")

"Eureka," Harold yelled, jumping up from his hiding place. "A Chippendale Vermillion! I'll be famous in Audubon circles!"

Alas, he had forgotten all about the quarry. Over he went, camera and film with him, the Chippendale Vermillion still seldom seen.

Naturally, Harold hadn't anticipated departing life so precipitously, but he had long worried about what would happen to the family fortune (Grandfather Ainsworth had made a fortune in coal mines) if he were the first to go.

Concerned that softhearted Bunny would squander it on all sorts of worthy causes, he had specified in his will that the money be put in trust to be administered by a Pittsburgh bank, Bunny to receive an annual income of one hundred fifty thousand with increases for inflation. At her death, whether or not she had remarried, the trust would become a charitable foundation. The family mansion—all those big hous-

es on LaFayette Terrace, built with coal money, were called mansions—would go to the county historical society at her death. Of course Harold discussed all of this with Bunny. She was in complete agreement.

Bunny's income enabled her not only to live well but to pay Clara Hogan, the longtime Ainsworth housekeeper, a nice salary (part of which Clara used for her mother-in-law's nursing home costs); to pay the two maids who came in four mornings a week a decent wage; to pay the part-time gardener more than the going rate. All of that still leaving Bunny with a substantial sum, allowing her to make generous contributions to local charities.

Bunny was well aware of her good fortune. Nevertheless, though far better off than any of her friends, in excellent health, she wasn't happy. Of course she missed Harold. He had been a large part of her life for twenty-five years even if most of the time he'd had his nose buried in an old book or was off birdwatching. But she'd often wished he had gotten half as excited at seeing her in one of her pretty pink nighties at bedtime as he did when telling her about his latest sighting, and as the years sped by following Harold's tragic death, she kept hoping that someone would come along who didn't know a Carolina Chickadee from a Philadelphia Flycatcher, a Cape May Warbler from a Bohemian Grosbeak.

Someone finally came along—Tony Gregory, a tall, husky, dark-haired, devilishly handsome, forty-six-year-old Lothario who had been married twice plus being involved in

many an *affaire du coeur*. Every single one of Tony's conquests, including the two ex-wives (rich widows who had bailed him out of a string of bad luck), remembered their time with him as the high point of their lives. Unfortunately Tony was in thrall to only one mistress, gambling. Nothing else mattered.

Bunny was already seated when Tony boarded the plane. It took him less than a minute to recognize quality. He smiled roguishly, she giggled girlishly, it was no contest. By the time the plane landed in Pittsburgh, Tony had learned all he needed to know.

Her name was Elizabeth Ainsworth ("My friends call me Bunny"); she was a widow; had no living relatives; her late husband's grandfather had owned coal mines; she lived in a small county seat town in a house "much too big"; passed the time "in the usual small town activities."

Wow, thought Tony. I've finally hit the jackpot.

It certainly looked like he had.

An old hand in such situations, Tony struck the right note, modestly describing himself as a cautious international entrepreneur ("I'm not a plunger") presently interested in putting together a Singapore real estate deal. Further modest revelations finally caused Bunny to interrupt him by saying that he had to be "a wonderfully compassionate human being to cancel an important meeting with your Wall Street bankers" to hurry to Pittsburgh to visit his hundred-and-five-year-old great-aunt before she died.

"Money's important, but family—

what there is left—comes first," Tony said solemnly. "She's the only relative I have left."

Bunny was returning from her annual theater-museum-shopping trip to New York. She and Harold had gone for years, and following his tragic death she had gone alone, to the despair of Clara Hogan, the housekeeper. A healthy, robust, not bad-looking widow in her late fifties (her dear Joe was killed in a mine accident early in the marriage), Clara had it pretty nice.

She had her own spacious third floor apartment, the fine salary, Wednesday and Sunday afternoons off (Bunny dined at the country club on those days). She visited her mother-in-law in the nursing home on Wednesdays, had to endure the inevitable question, "You're still keeping Joe's memory alive, aren't you, Clara?"

Clara did the cooking, supervised the two maids, did some dusting, straightened a lampshade—things like that—nothing too taxing. But she worried. For even though Bunny had assured her that she would be well-cared for in her old age, Clara—well aware that Bunny was a kindhearted, innocent person who regarded most people as true blue, the salt of the earth—feared the worst every time Bunny went to New York. (What if she falls for a fortune hunter; what would happen to me?)

"There goes the poor lamb on her way to slaughter," Clara moaned to the housecat every time the Hillsdale taxi picked up Bunny for the trip to the Pittsburgh airport. "A babe in the woods, all alone in that

wicked city where there's a dozen wolves in sheep's clothing ready to pounce on rich widows with their hearts on their sleeves. Mark my words, Midnight, one of these times she's coming back all aflutter, gigglin' she's met Prince Charming."

At which Midnight—technically a dumb animal but in reality one smart cookie—the trusted confidante of the housekeeper, would meow to say he shared her concern.

Midnight plays a vital part in this tale, which can almost be called a tragedy with a happy ending, if there is such a thing. He is the third Ainsworth housecat. Percy, the second one, was eighteen when it became obvious that the mice were gaining the upper hand. In accordance with Bunny's tearful instructions, Clara found a home for him with a lonely old couple to whom Percy's eighty-five-dollar a month pension was a godsend. A replacement had to be found.

Clara went to the County Humane Society, a ramshackle facility slowly sinking into the huge void left when the coal beneath was mined out years ago. There were six cats—clean, shiny, spayed or neutered, with all of their shots—awaiting (a) adoption or (b) the gas chamber.

"No, no, the poor creatures don't suffer," insisted the kind people there. "It's over in seconds. But it's a crying shame so few are adopted, how many are abandoned."

Clara picked a long, lean, black male with fiery green eyes and one and a half ears. She and Bunny agreed that Midnight was the perfect name.

Midnight blundered with his first catch. Though thoroughly schooled by Clara—including several trial runs with a toy ball that squeaked—Midnight was so proud of his first catch that he forgot Clara's repeated warning never to let Bunny see a mouse, dead or alive. He went running to Bunny with a poor little mouse still alive, squeaking pathetically, dangling from his mouth. Bunny had hysterics. Midnight learned his lesson.

He averaged about three mice a month ("Beats me how they get in," Clara said time after time); took them through the cat door in the bottom of the kitchen door, deposited them behind the garage, where the gardener put them in with the grass and foliage cuttings.

Musophobic Bunny had not gone into hysterics since Midnight's first catch five years back. Unfortunately, the record would soon be broken.

Clara's dire prediction came true, Bunny sailed home on cloud nine from her June 1994 trip, all aflutter. She had met Prince Charming.

"The most handsome, charming, compassionate man you can ever imagine, Clara," she gushed. "Imagine an international entrepreneur cancelling an important meeting with Wall Street bankers to rush to a Pittsburgh nursing home to visit his hundred-and-five-year-old great-aunt. Wait until you see him, Clara. And you will. He's coming to visit us on Saturday. You'll love Tony, Clara; I'm sure you will."

"What did I tell you," wailed Clara to Midnight that evening when they were alone in her apartment. "I

knew it was gonna happen, just knew it. She's been a sitting duck ever since the poor mister's been gone. And did you hear her—he's 'Tony' already. Ha; ten to one Prince Charming Tony is nothing but a two-bit gigolo that any grown woman with half an ounce of common sense could see right through. I'll never understand why someone like her—a college graduate, reads two books a week—can be so simple-minded. Can you, Midnight?"

That statement would have given Sigmund Freud pause, and Midnight was no Freud. He was simply a cat, a smart cat but still a cat. Clara (the poor woman needed someone to talk to) frequently forgot that.

Prince Charming arrived around four Saturday afternoon in a rented car. Clara, all gussied up (scorn for two-bit gigolos had lost out to feminine vanity), looked great. So did Midnight; bathed, brushed, scented. But Bunny outshone both of them. She had spent two hours at her favorite beauty parlor, gotten "the works," wore a gorgeous blue pants suit she had bought on Fifth Avenue. She looked no more than forty, in the bloom of radiant womanhood.

Tony rang the doorbell. Clara (having vowed to be totally immune to "the most handsome, charming, etc. etc.") opened the door while holding on to the doorknob. Which was a good thing; otherwise she might have fallen backward. For Prince Charming was everything Bunny claimed. And he was not only incredibly handsome, he oozed masculinity, mischief, mystery. Poor

Clara; bells rang, harps played, drums banged. Tony had that effect on women.

"You must be Clara," he said, favoring her with a gorgeous smile. "Bunny has told me how valuable you are to her." (Bunny had covered a lot of territory on the short flight to Pittsburgh.) Tony took one of Clara's hands, squeezed it.

Then he saw Bunny. He gave dazed Clara's hand one last strong squeeze, strode quickly to where Bunny was standing, took both of her hands in his, held them tightly while exclaiming in a voice that throbbed with manly melliflence, "Wow, Bunny, you look like two million dollars."

Poor Bunny, she blushed, she giggled, she glowed, she managed to say, "Oh, Tony, you ought to be ashamed of yourself for saying such things."

"No, I mean it. You look fabulous." Poor Bunny, she almost simpered.

Then it was Midnight's turn. He had been lurking behind a chair, watching with ill-concealed disgust the way the two women were fawning over an obvious four-flusher. He didn't fool Midnight. Cats can tell.

"And here's Midnight, our family pet," Bunny finally said as she motioned for Midnight to come forth and greet Prince Charming. Tempted to unleash a venomous hiss, Midnight refrained, Bunny having implored Clara to be sure Midnight was on his best behavior, her shameful musophobia always lurking in the background. Clara had—not happily either—followed instructions, and Midnight had finally gotten the drift.

So he came up to Tony, favored him with a curt meow, turned and left the room, determined to vent his disgust on a wayward mouse.

"Midnight doesn't seem to like me," said Tony, grinning boyishly.

"Oh no, darling," Bunny said quickly. "He's shy. Once he gets to know you, he'll be quite friendly."

Preliminaries out of the way, time flying (it was June eleventh, less than three months from the fateful deadline), operating from the best motel in town, buoyed by the evidence of big money—the mansion with its luxurious furnishings, the three servants, the expensive foreign car in the driveway—Tony wooed the enchanted Bunny with a ton of well-honed charm, dozens of roses, candlelight dinners at The Lookout, the hotel-restaurant in the mountains east of town.

It worked. Less than two weeks after he turned his roguish smile on Bunny on the flight to Pittsburgh, she capitulated, joyously accepting his offer of marriage.

Clara hadn't capitulated. Her feet solidly back on the ground after her one mad surge of unbridled passion, Clara was becoming more worried daily. And it wasn't entirely concern for her own welfare. She genuinely loved Bunny, and she was willing to bet that Tony Gregory was "a love 'em and leave 'em gigolo, out for nothing but money," who had broken many a woman's heart. Clara was terribly afraid that another heart would soon be broken.

It was a quiet wedding, performed by a justice of the peace in Grant

County, the county to the east of Ashford County. With his wife as a witness, a scratchy 78 rpm record playing a wedding march, the justice pronounced them man and wife as Tony slipped the wedding ring on Bunny's quivering finger. He had bought the ring two days before at a going-out-of-business jewelry store in the mall, paid a hundred fifty dollars for it. ("It's marked down from four hundred," said the elderly jeweler, tears in his eyes.) And after handing the astonished justice of the peace a hundred dollar bill (twenty-five was the usual stipend; now and then someone paid fifty), high-flyer Tony was down to exactly seven hundred fifty dollars and the jeweled watch. He hadn't been that poor in twenty years.

The justice's wife was the Grant County correspondent for the Hillsdale *Morning Clarion*. She interviewed the newlyweds, Bunny happily answering every question with such enthusiasm that Tony had to interrupt frequently.

"Now, Bunny," he kept saying, "Let's not go overboard."

"You see," she said, squeezing his arm, "He's so modest, not like many of today's brazen international entrepreneurs."

Of course Bunny would have preferred an elaborate wedding at St. Mark's in Hillsdale, but Tony—he was getting far too much publicity—thought it might be inappropriate in view of his great-aunt's recent death. Dear Bunny, adrift in paradise, bought that ludicrous story without a moment's hesitation.

"I understand, darling," she had said. "But how many men would be

so considerate of an aged distant relative? Oh, darling, I'm finding more and more admirable qualities about you every day."

At which Tony, beginning to feel like a heel (this latest conquest was getting to him) mumbled that a fellow had to do what a fellow had to do. He had reason to feel like a heel; his great-aunt, alias Pittsburgh Will, had died, been cremated the day Tony met Bunny on the plane.

A slight delay in the honeymoon ("Would Spain be all right, Bunny?" ... "Oh ... oh ... yes ... yes ... anywhere, darling?"), the Singapore negotiations reaching the crucial stage. Would Bunny mind waiting a few weeks?

Mind? Of course she wouldn't mind, whatever darling Tony wished was wonderful with her. Hmm, thought Tony, this is gonna be easier than I thought. I'll give it ten days—no longer—before I hit her for the money. Come to think of it, I'll need an extra twenty grand. That shouldn't bother her. She's loaded.

The newlyweds arrived back at the mansion around five that afternoon, Tony bringing his clothes in two expensive looking but somewhat battered pieces of luggage. Clara, a nervous wreck ("I'm tellin' you, Midnight, she's gone gaga over that fortune hunter"), opened the door, fearing the worst. It came.

"Congratulate me, Clara," Bunny squealed, waving her hand. "See, a wedding ring. I'm a bride. Tony and I were married this afternoon in Grant County. Isn't it wonderful?"

Then she grabbed Clara, hugged her tightly, exclaiming, "Oh, I'm so

happy, Clara. Tony's made me the happiest person on earth."

While that was going on, Tony made a valiant effort not to look like the cat that had swallowed the canary, but he failed. He awaited the housekeeper's reaction, pretty sure what it would be, for though he had charmed the two maids he was well aware that the housekeeper and the cat had him figured out.

Clara responded as anticipated. She managed to squirm free from Bunny's embrace, skewer Tony with a look of part outrage, part pure hate. So what, he thought, I'm in the driver's seat. I'll be out of here in a couple of weeks at the most.

Home now, Bunny began having qualms over sharing the bed that she and Harold had shared for so many years. Sly old Tony, sensing her uneasiness, suggested they spend the first night of the honeymoon at The Lookout.

"Oh, darling," said Bunny eagerly, "that's a splendid suggestion. It's so lovely in the mountains. Oh, darling, you're so, so thoughtful."

Wow, thought Tony, whatever I say is great with her. I may not wait two weeks, even ten days. I've been through hell these nine months.

Midnight had a tough night. Stretched full-length in his clean wicker basket on the floor beside Clara's bed, he was forced to respond to her unrelenting jeremiad against that "no good, two-bit, fortune hunting Casanova," a recurring theme being Tony's lack of evidence that he was what Bunny claimed him to be.

"If he's such a big-shot international entrenooper," she demanded,

"how come he's only got two measly suitcases? Wouldn't an entrenooper at least have a couple of trunks, Midnight?"

"Meow" (you'd think so), responded Midnight sleepily.

"And he's in for one hell of a surprise?"

"Meow (surprise)?"

"The trust fund, the money. It was in the paper when the mister's will was probated. She can't touch the family fortune. Sure, she has a damn nice income but it all goes out, over half to the charities. They'd go broke without her."

On it went. Once that four-flusher finds out about the trust fund, sees he's up the creek without a paddle, he'll skedaddle. And that'll break her heart; the woman is nuts about that rat."

Clara finally wound down, Midnight went to sleep, purring quietly as cats are wont to do.

The wedding story in the paper caused quite a stir; no wonder. Mr. Gregory was an international entrepreneur, currently engaged in delicate negotiations involving Singapore real estate. "As soon as the deal is completed, the couple will embark on a honeymoon in Spain, after which they will live in New York City" ("Putting you and me out in the cold," Clara told Midnight bitterly) "so Mr. Gregory can remain in close contact with his Wall Street bankers." Actually, Tony's bankers operated seven blocks north, four blocks west of Wall Street, the financial headquarters of Heillman & Sons, Pawnbrokers.

There was a lot more to the story. It sounded just a little too good to

many of Bunny's friends. Had the dear innocent fallen for a fortune hunter? In the same issue of the paper a shorter story told of Dr. Thomas Larkin, renowned Pittsburgh surgeon whose specialty had been otolaryngology (disorders of the ear, nose, throat). Dr. Larkin had retired following the death of his wife, had bought a house in the mountains east of town, planned "to take life easy, read a lot, and, if needed, do volunteer work at the library and the humane society."

Needed; both the library and the humane society were on the phone to him while the ink was still drying on the paper. And when Thelma Thompson, the real estate agent, described him to her associates as "a tall, slender, handsome man with all of his hair and a sad, sweet smile—he missed his wife" word spread, and a mere two days after the story appeared, two widows each in their late sixties, fortified with new hairdos, hurried to the library to volunteer their services while two other widows (the town, alas, is thronged with widows), equally as fortified, raced one another to the humane society.

Out in Las Vegas, June 1994 having arrived with no word from Tony Gregory, the manager of the casino (MBA, Princeton '77) that held Tony's markers, sought out Big Mo, told him that the casino had not heard from Tony since the night he gave the markers. "And we both know, Mo," said the manager, "that if Tony fails to redeem them, even though the amount is relatively insignificant, we have no recourse but

to institute legal proceedings, which would be a blot on the escutcheon of the entire gaming industry. If you know where Tony is, I suggest you remind him we intend to collect."

Mö was no dumbbell (a high school graduate, C-minus), but he wouldn't have known an escutcheon from an Estonian. It didn't matter, he got the drift. He said that he had no idea where Tony was but would try to locate him.

Mo got the fellows together; himself, Vince, Slim, six other premiums. No one had heard from Tony. "Why not hire a P.I.?" Vince said. "We can split the costs." A good idea, everyone agreed. That was the very day Tony met Bunny on his good Samaritan flight to Pittsburgh.

"Tony Gregory, huh?" said the P.I., an old hand, "I'll find him." And he did.

Clara, in a foul mood having read the story of the wedding in the morning paper (International entrepreneur . . . what a crock. If that con man's an international entrepreneur, I'm the Queen of Sheba.) was halfheartedly dusting "the poor dead mister's precious books" when the phone rang. She pounced on it, hoping it was another sugary-voiced female marketer. (I'll straighten her out in a hurry.)

"Hello," she snarled.

"My, sister, you're in a good mood," said a gruff male voice, "Take it easy. I'm not selling anything. All I want to know is, is there a fellow named Tony Gregory there?"

Clara felt a funny feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Well, ah, I mean . . . he is and he isn't. Now, hold your horses, gimme

a chance. He's on his . . . I mean he's out of town, but he'll be back this afternoon. Is . . . is there a message?"

"There's a message all right. You got a pencil?"

Clara picked up a pencil. Her hand shaking, she held it over a notepad. "Go ahead."

"Tell Tony to call Big Mo in Vegas the minute he gets back. It's important. Here's the number."

After giving the number the caller said, "Now read it back." Which Clara did, her voice quivering.

"Okay, have a nice day," said the caller as he hung up. Clara put the phone down gently, walked slowly across the room, collapsed on a sofa, her heart racing.

Big Mo from Vegas, Big Mo from Vegas, Big Mo from Vegas; she kept repeating the ominous words. He sounded exactly like Edward G. Robinson in one of those gangster movies. And it could mean only one thing. That lowdown four-flusher Mr. Tony Gregory was nothing but a rotten gambler and he was in hock to a Las Vegas syndicate and he sweet-talked the poor simple-minded missus into marrying him so he could swindle her out of the money he needed to pay off the syndicate. Now what, she groaned? He's in big trouble. You don't fool with the syndicate. You pay up or it's in the drink. (Clara was living in the lawless past. Tony was in no danger of losing his precious life; all he could lose was his treasured good name, be ostracized, blacklisted, held in contempt by his fellow gamblers.)

As the two maids went about their duties upstairs in their exemplary fashion, Clara tried to calm

down, to think what she had to do. Is that rat going to vamoose, skedaddle, leaving the poor missus with a broken heart once he finds out he can't touch the trust fund? No sir, lover boy's in big trouble; he'll try to figure some way of getting the money from her.

Then (oh my God) she thought of it, the life insurance. Clara would have bristled were she accused of eavesdropping, but could she help it if every now and then she'd happened to be outside the den when Bunny and Harold were discussing important matters?

On one such occasion she had overheard them discussing life insurance and was impressed by something the good mister said. "Yes, each of our policies is for two hundred fifty thousand." Why shouldn't she be impressed?—her own policy, taken out in 1979, was for one thousand dollars. ("Enough to bury me," she'd said at the time.)

"I clean forgot about the life insurance," she moaned. "That poor innocent woman, she's in terrible danger. He's gonna murder her for the insurance. It happens every day, the papers are full of it (Clara was unaware that following Harold's death, Bunny—since she had no living relatives—had made the county humane society the beneficiary).

"That's it, that's it," she wailed. "I'll bet he's already found out he can't touch the trust fund. That leaves the life insurance, him being the natural normal beneficiary. This is awful, I gotta warn her before he pushes her out of a window."

She jumped up, ran to the telephone stand, picked up the phone

book, fumbled through the pages, finally found the number to The Lookout. Frantic now, she dialed. But she hung up before anyone could answer.

What am I gonna tell her? Oh, Mrs. Gregory (I'll never get used to calling her that), that snake in the grass what hypnotized you into marrying him is gonna murder you? He's nothing but a rotten gambler, and he's in hock to a Las Vegas syndicate. You know what that means. You're in awful, awful danger.

No good, she moaned. She'd think I'd lost my marbles. Her dear, wonderful Tony, the international entrenooper a gambler? Why, that's absurd. Where did you hear such a ridiculous story, Clara? Are you sure you're not jealous of me for marrying such a divine man?

"Jealous," she snorted. "I'd rather marry Rasputin. Wait a minute. I've got it. I'll wait until they get back this afternoon. As soon as they come in I'll say, real casual-like, 'Oh, Mr. Gregory, Big Mo called from Vegas. He seemed real upset. He said for you to call him the minute you come in.' Now we'll see how that four-flusher wiggles out of that. It oughta kill his goose with her. Sure, it'll break her heart when he has to hit the road, but a broken heart's better than being six feet under.

How had things gone in the honeymoon suite in the starry mountains? Heavenly, just heavenly, out of this world. For Tony—a rank neophyte in bird lore (he knew a pigeon from a chicken, a sparrow from a crow, that was about it) brought to the bridal chamber a seasoned cor-

nucopia of the kind of techniques that dear stick-in-the-mud Harold had read about in his old books but would never have thought of suggesting to Bunny. What would she think of him; brand him a satyr, a fiend? Ah, how little we know.

The newlyweds arrived back at the LaFayette Terrace mansion at four thirty. Clara was on her own. Midnight, a conscientious workman, hadn't finished his afternoon circuit of the large house.

Determined to unmask the four-flusher, Clara flung the door open, felt a sickening feeling. God help me, she moaned, seeing the stars in Bunny's eyes, the way she clung to that rotten rat's arm. That poor woman; she's bewitched by that rotten Swine Gali. (Dear Clara; she meant Svengali. Away back she had seen the movie *Trilby*, where vile Svengali hypnotized poor Trilby. It had made a lasting impression.) God knows what awful stuff went on up there in the mountains.

But she had to act. She closed the door, waited until Tony put the luggage down, made her announcement. "By the way, Mr. Gregory," she said in her best casual-like voice, "there was an important phone call for you."

"A phone call?" he said, the barest quiver in his manly voice. "Who was it from?"

But Clara was watching Bunny, anxious to see how she was taking it. Bunny looked interested. Good, thought Clara, wait'll she hears what's coming. Clara stalled, playing it for all it was worth.

"Well," demanded Tony, a little nastily. "Who called?"

"Someone named, ah, oh yeah, Big Mo. He said he was calling from Vegas. You're to call him right away. He seemed upset. Here's the number." (She had kept the number for herself, just in case.) She handed him the slip of paper. He grabbed it, stuffed it in his shirt pocket. Clara looked at Bunny again. Ha, was that a cloud over the starry eyes? It sure was. And how was loverboy taking it? Not good, not good. He coughed a couple of times—seemed to have a frog stuck in his throat. Upset the old applecart, Clara gloated. Hit the road, you two-bit Casanova, you struck out. It looked that way.

"Vegas?" said Bunny, uncertainly, "would that be Las Vegas, darling? And who did you say called, Clara?"

"Big Mo," enunciated Clara, loud and clear.

"What an odd name," said Bunny, "and from Las Vegas. Would Mr. Mo be involved in gambling, darling?"

Of course not, gloated Clara, he's that Chinese detective who solves all those mysteries. Isn't that right, you four-flusher? But by then Tony was ready to wiggle.

"I'm afraid that the Big Mo person is involved in gambling, honey," he confessed, a wan smile on his handsome countenance. "It's, well, all families seem to have a black sheep; ours is Uncle Mike, my late father's younger brother. Poor Uncle Mike can't stop gambling, and he loses all too often. I'll have to bail him out again, I'm afraid. I'll phone this Big Mo person after we get settled."

Poor Clara, outfoxed, for she could see that Bunny had bought that fairy tale hook, line, and sinker.

"Oh, darling," Bunny gushed. "I might've known it would be something like that. You're so compassionate."

"It's not a big deal," Tony mumbled, taking care not to look at the housekeeper. Damn that nibnose, I gotta watch out for her.

Before the newlyweds went upstairs, Bunny told Clara they wouldn't be dining out. "Could you whip up something light. Clara?"

Clara grunted that she could. On the way upstairs Bunny thought of something. "Darling, I thought your great-aunt was your last relative. Did you forget Uncle Mike?"

"No, I didn't forget him," Tony confessed, "but he's the only one left and—well, I'm not too proud of him."

"You shouldn't say that, darling. Such people are to be pitied. It's like a disease, gambling. People become addicted, the poor things."

"I guess you're right," Tony said mournfully.

While Clara was in the kitchen tearing hell out of an innocent head of lettuce and Bunny was taking a shower, Tony crept downstairs, went into the den, locked the door, phoned Big Mo. And got an earful.

"What the hell's goin' on?" demanded Mo. "How come you haven't paid the markers? You wanta put the kibosh on the rest of us? There's talk the casino's gonna' put a fifty thousand dollar limit on us premiums. Me and the fellows is damn disappointed in you, Tony, damn disappointed. What have you got to say for yourself?"

Tony had plenty to say. Did Mo and the fellows really believe that he would weasel out of the debt, allow

his good name to be smeared to hell and gone? Hadn't he paid every marker in the past? Tony went on like that until Big Mo interrupted.

"Yeah, yeah, get to the point. Are you gonna pay the marker or not?"

Of course he was. But he'd had a hell of a time finding a rich widow. Huh? Yeah he'd found one, married her. Rich? Loaded. But he'd only been married for two days and he hadn't planned on hitting her up for the dough right away, but since Mo and the fellows seemed to be worried about him being a disgrace to the whole gaming industry, Mo could tell the casino it would be hearing from him no later than ten days from now.

Mo relayed that information to the casino manager, who said it was good news. It would be good to have Tony back.

Poor Midnight, he had another bad night. Clara, doing her best not to think of what was going on down below in the master bedroom, filled the cat in on the latest rotten development. The snake in the grass had slithered free, come up with a fake relative, the family black sheep, when it was as plain as the nose on your face that His Nibs was in hock to a syndicate. He owed big money. "And wait'll he hits her up for dough and she tells him about the trust fund; can't touch it. That's not the worst.

"Her life insurance, it's for two hundred fifty thousand dollars. And somehow he'll sweet-talk her into telling him about it. And God help us when he does."

"Meow (bad news?)."

"You can say that again."

"Meow."

Clara kept going, her grim, dire theme being that there was murder afoot. "You and me, Midnight," she finally concluded, "are gonna keep our eyes on that rotten rat every second of the day. It's up to us to keep that good, kindhearted—yeah, simpleminded—woman alive. Right?"

"Meow (you can count on me)." And when it came to crunch time, old Midnight came through with flying colors, almost losing the last of his allotted nine lives. It was a narrow squeak.

Now to the huge master bedroom on the second floor, around one thirty A.M., soft music wafting from an all-night radio station. Once again—more than once—Bunny had soared to heights far beyond anything ever attained by the Lapland Larkspur. ("A high flyer, soars far above the clouds.")

Not totally exhausted but close, Tony—galvanized by the ominous words from Big Mo—changed the timetable. He couldn't wait two weeks, even ten days; his good name was already being tarnished.

In a tender, husky, sexy voice—the same one that had caused women much more worldly than Bunny to rush to their checkbooks—Tony bewailed poor Uncle Mike's distressing predicament. He'd phoned Big Mo, was shocked to learn that Uncle Mike had given markers totaling two hundred fifty thousand (the extra thirty thousand was to cover the interest, give him a stake to start anew).

He felt rotten, embarrassed as hell, to have to ask Bunny to lend him the money. "Just until the Singapore deal goes through, of course." Uncle Mike had no one else to turn to, and Tony hated to see the family name smeared.

In "The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing" Aesop—another of those sage fellows; he flourished around 550 B.C.—wrote: "Appearances are deceiving." The old boy would have chorled in patriarchal glee had he been around to see the delicious juxtaposition of his time-honored adage as Tony, the wolf, heard the horrifying news from Bunny, the pauper.

Calling Bunny a pauper was stretching it a bit, but as far as stunned Tony was concerned, she might as well have been on food stamps. Cuddled up to her divine Prince Charming, her pretty pink nightie in delightful dishabille, Bunny drifted between paradise and the bedroom as she answered Tony's increasingly anguished questions in a sleepy, cooing voice.

Two . . . hundred . . . and . . . fifty . . . thousand . . . dollars? Why, Uncle Mike ought to be ashamed of himself. But while she thought it commendable on Tony's part to rescue a ne'er-do-well relative from the clutches of the gambling vice, she couldn't possibly help. Yes, she had a fine income ("Harold left me very well off") but she was obligated to many charities and maybe she was a little extravagant also, but the money was gone at year's end.

"But . . . but . . . but . . ." whimpered poor Tony, "what about the Ainsworth coal fortune?"

"Oh, well . . . it's in a trust fund. Can't be touched."

"Oh my God," wailed Tony. He didn't quit, he couldn't. Couldn't she ("Just for a month or two, honeybunch, until the Singapore deal goes through?") mortgage the house?

Unfortunately, she didn't own the house. It was deeded to the county historical society, would go to it at her death.

Shaken to the core, Tony threw caution to the wind. Poor Uncle Mike was in a terrible state. Tony was afraid he might "take the bridge." He hated to ask, but could she borrow on her life insurance policy (he desperately hoped she had a big policy).

"Just for a few weeks, honeybunch."

About there a reasonably intelligent woman would have heard a bell go *bing-bong*. Loudly, too. But if the bell tolled for Bunny, she didn't hear it. Clara Hogan had it right; Bunny was bewitched by that "rotten Swine Gali." But give the enraptured woman the benefit of the doubt; she wasn't the first woman to be bewitched by magical Tony.

"Life . . . insurance . . ." Bunny murmured in a sleepy voice. Yes, she had a nice policy but the beneficiary was the county humane society since she had no living relatives. She would feel "a little queasy asking the society to allow her to borrow on the policy."

"Besides, darling," she murmured—Tony had to lean close to hear, "I'm sure that if you tell the casino you'll pay Uncle Mike's debt as soon as the Singapore deal goes through, they'll agree. And, darling . . . do . . .

you think that when the deal is finalized . . . oh, I hate to ask."

"Go ahead, ask," groaned Tony, hardly believing what he was hearing.

"Well . . ." Bunny's voice was fading, sleep beckoned, "we are . . . about one hundred fifty thousand dollars short in the fund to buy land and build a more modern humane society building. I would be . . . be so proud . . . if when the Singapore deal is . . . done . . . if you make up the difference . . . in . . ." That was all. She had fallen asleep.

And that was all for Tony Gregory, shrewd, charming, experienced wooer of rich widows. He had rolled snake eyes. Moaning piteously, he uncuddled Bunny, crawled out of bed, staggered to the bathroom, gulped down two aspirins, a throbbing headache having suddenly hit him.

Holding his head, he collapsed into a lounge chair, spent the remainder of the night sunk in deep despair, time after time moaning, "What the hell am I gonna do?"

As a gorgeous sun rose over Hillsdale he crawled back into bed. By then, cringing and squirming, he had bowed to the inevitable. Unless he wanted to become a despised outcast, have the family name dragged in the gutter, be forced to abandon the only life he had known for the past twenty years, the only life he loved, he was going to have to commit murder, a heartrending realization for someone who was not only a sentimental person, but one who had gone to parochial schools, who had been an altar boy until he was sixteen years old, whose saint-

ed mother had prayed that he would become a priest.

An accident the only solution. He would have to "take care" of Bunny (just thinking of the word "murder" tied him in knots) in such a way that she wouldn't suffer. But how? That was the two hundred fifty thousand dollar question.

Next morning, after a fine breakfast served by a pursed-lipped Clara, Tony, acute misery hiding under a spurious ebullience, said he might go to Pittsburgh that day.

"My New York bankers have a connection with a Pittsburgh bank," he said, "and I think it'd pay me to visit them, see if they can't push New York along on the Singapore deal. And..." here he stopped, then went on in an offhand manner, "I think I'll turn in the car, take a taxi back. Would you mind if we used your car from now on?"

He waited, barely breathing. Would she find that just a little curious? Why would a rich international entrepreneur seem worried about the continuing costs of a rental car? (Because he was running out of money, that's why.) But he needn't have worried. Bunny was in seventh heaven, out of this world; a rented car meant nothing.

"Why that's a splendid idea, darling," she responded exuberantly, looking at him with adoring eyes, "Now that we're married, we don't need two cars. But hurry back, darling, I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too, Bunny," Tony said as he stood up, bent over, and kissed her on the cheek. Clara, lurking just outside of the dining room, took it all in, fuming inwardly.

"When is that woman gonna wake up? Can't she see what he is? He can't even afford a rental car? I have to do something; come right out, spill the beans."

But after putting the dishes in the dishwasher, she backed down. She needed indisputable proof, something the rotten rat couldn't wiggle out of. "It has to be foolproof," she told herself dismally. "She's so crazy about him, nothing short of his coming after her with a butcher knife is gonna bring her to her senses. Please, God, don't let it come to that."

Tony pulled into the rental car agency in Pittsburgh around eleven. After he paid the bill, he was left with cash on hand of two hundred seventy-six dollars and the expensive watch.

Sick at heart, he looked in a phone book at the car agency, seeking a financial institution comparable to the esteemed Heillman & Sons. He picked The Old Reliable Pawnbrokers, estab. 1907. He checked the book again, jotted down the address of a national insurance company office, stopped at a drugstore, bought a city map, walked the six blocks to the pawnbrokers' sinking deeper into despair with every step. Ten minutes later he reached the absolute abysmal depths, pretty close to the end of the line.

"What," he roared, "one lousy grand? Quit kidding me. That watch cost me four thousand. I could get twenty-five hundred minimum in New York."

"This is Pittsburgh," said the gray-haired pawnbroker, a wisp of a

smile sneaking across his face. "We're cheapskates. Take it or leave it."

Tony took it, mad as hell. They sure kick a fellow when he's down, he moaned as he left. Am I ever gonna get another break? Has my luck run out for the rest of my life?

Not yet. He got a huge break (Lady Luck suddenly remembering the good times?) a few minutes later, but it would be several days before it dawned on him that he now had the perfect weapon for the perfect crime. He came to an intersection, turned left instead of right. That made all the difference. Had he gone right as he had planned, having previously located the insurance company's location via the map, he wouldn't have encountered the toy store and "A Narrow Squeak" would have turned out differently. How differently? We'll never know. All we know is what actually happened.

Still mad at the pawnbroker, he had gone three blocks in the wrong direction before he realized it. He was about to turn back when he saw a crowd about thirty feet ahead, gathered outside a store window. Curious, he joined the onlookers.

The sign on the store window proclaimed TOYS FOR ALL AGES. Inside, another sign announced the arrival of the latest marvel:

"Mus Musculous Facsimulus Korea, a remote-controlled mouse, an amazing clone of the real thing. Does everything a mouse does, even to the squeak. Can be controlled from as far away as a hundred yards. Scare the daylights out of your wife or sweetheart, a barrel of fun, only \$42.95."

And the incredible brown creature did act like a real mouse. It raced around a large obstacle course inside the store, adroitly dodging plants, plastic rocks, other obstructions. It turned left, stopped, turned right, whirled one hundred eighty degrees, meantime squeaking exactly like an American mouse, no Korean accent (the squeaks were sent outside via a speaker). There was no evidence as to who was manipulating the little brown devil.

I'll be damned, thought Tony as he was about to leave, what'll they think of next. Then he heard a woman say, "Ugh, that thing gives me the creeps. If my husband ever pulled that on me, I'd poison him."

"Me, too, Marge," said her companion. "I'm scared to death of mice. Let's get out of here."

Women, thought Tony; no wonder they're called the weaker sex. By the time he reached the insurance office the incident had faded; he had more serious matters to think about.

There are many types of accident insurance policies and filling out a short form is about all that's required. Policies can be purchased for various amounts, to cover many types of accidents, including accidents involving death. Tony took out separate policies on himself and Bunny, each for a quarter million dollars for accidental death, the cost a total of eighty-five dollars for two months. Taking out the policy on himself was about the only thing he had thought of to help divert suspicion from himself when and if the horrible deed was done. ("As if that'll help," he moaned to himself as he left the insurance agency. "Hell, un-

less I'm twenty miles away when—gee, this is awful, awful.”)

Feeling rotten, he walked around downtown until he found an expensive restaurant in a hotel, had a thirty-five dollar lunch, got indigestion, although it might have been the first indication of conscience pangs. For he had never, never thought of murdering anyone. Now here he was plotting to murder a fine, decent, kindhearted human being. It was tearing him apart. And for more than one reason, for to his amazement he had fallen under Bunny's sweet, innocent, deliriously happy spell. Incredibly, the bewitcher was not doing the bewitching. Svengali would have been crushed, Clara Hogan dumbfounded.

What the hell's come over me, he moaned as he walked toward a taxi stand, surreptitiously holding his aching stomach? Here I am falling for a fifty-two-year-old woman (he had seen her age on the marriage certificate) who dyes her hair, who's damn well educated but who's got about as much common sense as a ten-year-old kid, who seems to think most people want to do what's right.

Yeah, she's a goodlooker for her age—damned goodlooking—dresses well, is a real lady, but I've had plenty like her, and younger ones. It's just gotta be that I've never come across anyone like her, a grown woman who worries more about other people than herself, who spends half her time writing checks for needy causes and going to meetings trying to raise money for things like a new dog pound or a new roof on the library.

Listen to me. I gotta stop this kind

of thinking. I'm smack behind the eight ball. What the hell will I do for the rest of my life if I can't pay off the markers? I'm hooked on gambling, there's no two ways about it.

It's a thirty-five mile trip from downtown Pittsburgh to Hillsdale, and after some to and fro discussion a price was agreed upon. Tony sat up front with the cabbie—a thick, balding fellow of fifty or so—and had to listen to a mournful monologue about how tough times were since the steel and coal industries were done. A fellow had a tough time feeding his family. Most days it was hardly worthwhile showing up for work. And a trip out “to the sticks” was no bargain. He'd come back empty.

By the time they reached the LaFayette Terrace mansion Tony felt so sorry for the poor cabbie that he tipped him twenty dollars. Then, on an impulse (it was probably his conscience again, although his stomach still hurt like hell) he thrust another twenty at the cabbie.

“Thanks, sir,” the cabbie said jubilantly. “I knew you was first class. I said to myself when you got in, there's a bigtime high roller. You're a good man, sir, a good man.”

I used to be, thought Tony dimly as he entered the house. It seemed deserted. He went into the den, looked out back through one of the high windows. The car was gone. (“Trying to raise money for the dog pound.” No, it was the library this time.) And old nibnose and her sneaky cat were sitting out under a big tree in the back yard. (“Ten to one they're raking me over the coals.” It was a safe bet.)

But he had time to hide the accident policies. Harold had had hundreds of books; there were shelves from floor to ceiling around most of the room. Tony picked a shelf in a far corner, put the policies in Volume 3, Phoebe-Tanager, of *Birds of North America*.

Now came the tough part, the perfect crime, but he hadn't the slightest idea how to pull it off. Then Bunny begged him to watch the sunset with her from the little balcony on the second floor.

It was a wooden affair about eight feet square, reached via a glass door from the hallway. It had been added by Grandfather Ainsworth when his wife said she'd like to have a place from which to watch sunsets.

The balcony had a wrought-iron grating about forty-eight inches high to keep onlookers from falling onto the rock garden thirty feet below—a real rock garden, huge rocks having been brought down from the mountains. Seasonal flowers flourished among them.

Harold and Bunny had watched hundreds of sunsets, never tiring of the gorgeous displays. Bunny, calling the balcony "my wee widow's walk" had continued watching after poor Harold's tragic fall into the quarry. Now she had someone to watch with her again.

She took Tony by the arm, steered him out onto the balcony, just as a mammoth sun was setting behind the faroff hills.

"There, darling," she said, excitedly, "didn't I tell you? Isn't it magnificent, simply magnificent?"

It was indeed, the sky around the huge red ball ablaze in a dozen daz-

zling shades. Tony didn't answer. He couldn't. But it wasn't the brilliant display. It was Bunny. She was standing in the southwest corner, leaning slightly over the railing, looking toward the northwest (the sun sets north of west in the height of summer). The top railing had moved, barely moved, but it had moved enough to cause Tony's heart to skip a beat.

"For God's sake, Bunny," he almost shouted as he lurched forward, grabbed her, pulled her back. "You could have gone over. Geez, you almost gave me heart failure."

"But there's no danger, darling," Bunny told him, her voice joyful. "Why, I've been doing this for years. The grating is firmly attached." (Oh how he must love me; oh how lucky I am to have found such a wonderful, wonderful man!)

"There's always the first time," he told her. "Now come on, let's go, the show's over." What if that thing had broken loose and she had gone over onto the rocks? Who would they blame? Me, the new husband. ("You say your wife leaned against the railing, Mr. Gregory, and it gave way? And you were on the balcony with her? Hmm, I'm afraid your story doesn't hold water. Book him, sergeant."). Sure, it's got to be an accident but one that leaves me in the clear.

Late that night Bunny cuddled close, cooing in her sleep, Tony thought of the balcony. Maybe I can work something out. I'll check that grating tomorrow.

Which he did. After breakfast he closeted himself in the den, telling Bunny he had to do some figuring.

He waited until she had been picked up by one of her friends (the humane society meeting, a new facility was becoming more urgent) and until the two maids, old nibnose, and the cat were in the kitchen having coffee and milk (milk for Midnight). Then he hurried upstairs, carefully opened the sliding glass door, went onto the balcony.

He hit the top railing a smart blow with his open hand. It moved a good inch or two. His heart beating fast, he knelt down, inspected the long bolts that anchored the balcony to the house. There were four, one on each end of the top railing, one on each end of the bottom railing. They were rusty, a lot of the original metal gone.

That's thing's a deathtrap, he told himself as he closed the glass door. Those bolts are nothing but slivers. Geez, what a mess. I have to keep Bunny from bumping that grating too hard while I try to come up with an accident happening to her with me nowhere around. Maybe I could be down below and yell up to her, tell her to look down and tell me what those yellow flowers were called. That balcony's my only hope. Think, man, think, there has to be a way of using it.

For the rest of the day he wracked his brain trying to think of some scheme with the balcony as the main weapon. He got nowhere. He simply couldn't come up with anything better than the yellow flowers idea, and the more he thought about it, the more hopeless it looked.

Sunset that evening was even more spectacular than on the previous evening, but it was wasted on

Tony. On edge, he kept his eyes riveted on Bunny, ready to grab her if she leaned too hard against the grating. The poor man; everything depended upon his keeping the intended victim alive until he could "take care" of her.

They dined at The Lookout again, the atmosphere festive, the night beautiful, music—loud music—along with exuberant hilarity seeping into the dining room every now and then from the ballroom where a wedding party was in progress. Bunny was again in heaven, Tony far, far below, although he continued to give the impression that he was on top of the world.

There was no festivity in Clara Hogan's apartment. All evening she had waxed ominously on the way things were going. She was certain that "four-flusher" was up to something.

"I'm a nervous wreck," she told Midnight. "What if something happened to her and I hadn't warned her. How would I feel? Well, I've had it. First thing tomorrow I'm going to give her Big Mo's number, beg her to call him, find out what a no-good bum . . ."

She stopped abruptly. The car had pulled up to the garage behind the house.

"It's them," she exclaimed, jumping out of bed in her bare feet, her short pink nightie, "They're back." She ran to the couch, which sat under the small screened window (it was always open in summer, the big oak providing shade and a breeze). Midnight took two leaps, landed on the couch, put his two front paws on the window ledge,

looked down. Repairs were being made to the garage; the car was being left out.

There wasn't much to see, the old oak in full bloom, one branch nearly touching the window. But they could listen. They heard Bunny. She seemed very upset.

"I'm still so ashamed," she was saying, "screaming the way I did. It's a wonder someone didn't come running out, thinking I was being murdered."

"Now, Bunny," Clara heard Tony say, "I told you it was no big deal. The way that crazy band was playing no one could have heard. Now come on, take my arm, let's go in."

That was all. What was that all about, thought Clara as she went back to her bed. Why would she scream? Wait . . . a . . . minute. Wait . . . a . . . minute, ten to one that rat was up to some shenanigan—maybe trying to shove her off that cliff behind the hotel—and it didn't work and she didn't know what he was up to. Well, that's it.

"That does it, Midnight. I've had enough. I'm spilling the beans tomorrow, the chips can fall wherever they fall. I mean it. He's getting desperate. And I'm gonna throw a sprag in his wheels."

"Meow (good for you; now let's get some sleep)."

Once upstairs it didn't take Tony long to convince Bunny that her hysterics, followed by her confession that she had suffered from musophobia all her life, made no difference to him. He still loved her, and by the time she fell asleep she believed him.

Tony stayed awake, all keyed up.

A plan was forming, a complicated plan but it was all he had. He couldn't stand much more. He had to get back to the tables.

Next morning at breakfast he asked Bunny if she would mind if he borrowed the car, explaining that he needed to consult with the Pittsburgh bankers. Why, of course he could borrow the car. She had a dozen friends eager to take her wherever she needed to go. Which was true, every one of them wanted to learn everything they could about Bunny's new husband. And Bunny was eager to tell them what a kind, wonderful, gorgeous man he was.

As soon as Tony left, Clara, taking a deep breath ("Here goes nothin'. I'll probably lose my job, but I can't wait another minute."), approached Bunny, who was sitting in the front room looking pensive. Bunny, seeing her, spoke first.

"Oh, Clara, I was going to find you. Sit down, dear. I have . . . well . . . have . . . something to tell you, something of which I'm thoroughly ashamed but I'm sure it won't come as a surprise to you."

Clara sat down with a thump. Holy smoke, she's finally got wise, seen through that four-flusher, is gonna divorce him. Thank God."

No, no, no; that wasn't it.

Thwarted again, Clara, in a vile mood, went looking for Midnight. As expected she found him in the basement, fertile mouse territory, always the first area checked each day.

"Wait'll you hear this," she snarled. "You're not gonna believe it. Listen to this."

Midnight assumed a listening pose.

"It was a mouse caused it. Ha, I knew that'd get you." (At the mention of "mouse" Midnight's one and a half ears had perked up.) "Anyway, honest to God this is drivin' me crazy . . . after dinner last night they went out to the parking lot behind the restaurant. His Nibs opened the door, was holding it open while she was getting seated, when a mouse, probably a poor scrawny little field mouse, jumped right smack into her lap. She screamed to high hell and back. 'Oh, Clara,' she told me, 'I made an utter fool of myself, shrieking bloody murder. Why no one came running out is . . . oh, it was awful, so, so humiliating.' Then, guess what, Midnight?"

Midnight hadn't the slightest idea.

"Listen to what she told me. 'Dear Tony, so calm, so intrepid, grabbed the creature by its tail, flung it over the cliff.' Geez, you'da thought he wrestled down a mountain lion. After she calmed down, she told him about her phobia. 'Now that my shameful secret is out, Clara,' she said, 'I have nothing to hide. Tony and I are on firmer ground than ever.' Makes ya sick, doesn't it, Midnight?"

"Meow (extremely frustrating)."

"But we're not giving up, are we?"

"Meow (not for a minute)."

Tony was in a miserable mood by the time he reached Pittsburgh, and having to drive around downtown for almost a half hour to find a vacancy in a parking garage only added to his misery. Dejectedly walking

toward the toy store, he told himself that the way his luck had been going the store would be all out of the mouse, the vital element in his plan.

He was lucky.

"You're lucky," the salesman told him, "this is the last one, and we don't figure on being able to get any more." The store didn't want any more. It was sick of the technological miracle creature. One complaint after another ("The damn thing keeps running amok."). Of course the salesman didn't tell Tony that.

The toy store was a short distance from Point State Park, and not wanting to get back to Hillsdale yet, Tony walked down to the park, found a shady bench. It was a beautiful day. There were dozens of flowerbeds, a huge fountain sent water high in the air, the day was sunny, breezy, perfect. People were in a happy mood, a group of schoolchildren—fourth graders, Tony guessed—in the charge of two teachers, were staring in fascination at the point where the Monongahela and the Allegheny join to form the mighty Ohio.

Suddenly, with something that sounded like a choked sob, Tony remembered fourth grade at St. John the Baptist's in Hoboken and Sister Anastasia—she taught geography, history, religion, penmanship—telling the kids that the French and Indian War had begun at the Forks of the Ohio, at "what is now Pittsburgh."

Geez, he thought, those were happy times, and I didn't know it. We could hardly wait for recess. Forty-five minutes later, still steeped in gloom, he walked to the garage, got

the car, drove to Hillsdale, skipping lunch. He felt bad enough as it was.

The next few days were agonizing ones for Tony. He desperately needed to make enough trial runs with the mouse to be certain that nothing could go wrong, but it wasn't until early Friday afternoon that an opportunity came. The nursing home where Clara's mother-in-law had been for seven years phoned. She had been rushed to the hospital. It looked bad. Bunny hurried Clara into the car, drove her to the hospital, remained with her.

Tony went into action. He retrieved the box containing the mouse and the remote from behind *Fauna of Ashford County* in the den, hurried upstairs, opened the sliding glass door, stood in the hall looking at the safety grating, visualizing the scheme. It was hot on the balcony, a wave of heat rushed into the hall. A cold chill wove up and down Tony's spine. Why did I ever start to gamble, he moaned.

The plan, it would be sunset, Bunny alone on the balcony, he having made some excuse ("I have to get something from the den, Bunny; stay here, I'll be right back."). That'd be the easy part. The mouse had to work perfectly, running onto the balcony, squeaking menacingly, attacking Bunny, pushing her against the grating, her screams bringing Nibnose Hogan from her apartment where she usually was around sunset. But it'd be too late for Bunny.

Tony, of course, would be part-way down the stairs, nowhere near the balcony. Over would go grating, Bunny, mouse. Tony would rush outside, grab the mouse to dispose of

later. He didn't want to think how he was going to feel seeing Bunny dead among the rocks. Nibnose would have to testify (It'll break her heart, Tony told himself) that he was downstairs when the horrible accident happened.

He had read the instructions a dozen times. The mouse could be controlled from as far away as one hundred yards, and the person operating the remote (it looked exactly like a TV remote; had five buttons, START, STRAIGHT, RIGHT, LEFT, STOP) did not have to be within sight of the mouse.

He was ready. He stood at the top of the stairway, put the mouse down, was about to press START when he suddenly thought of something.

"That cat. Geez, I nearly fouled up before I got started."

He went down the hall, opened the door leading to the third floor apartment. Midnight stood on the top step, hackles raised, eyes blazing, hissing. "Okay, buster," Tony told him, "I'll take care of you."

He shut the door, went to the bedroom, got a small chair, wedged it securely between the door jambs. It completely covered the cat flap in the bottom of the door. He went back down the hall, pressed START. Off scampered the little brownish-gray creature, squeaking mouselike, tail wagging, everything perfect. It was almost opposite the door opening before Tony pressed STOP. It stopped.

I'll be damned, Tony thought, it worked. At the same time he was thinking, miserably thinking; what if Mo and the fellows saw me now. They'd swear I'm going batty. And maybe I am.

Batty or not, he had to keep testing. Now let's see if I can turn the thing around, bring it back. He pressed **START**, quickly pressed **LEFT**, then **STRAIGHT**. The remarkable mouse reacted perfectly, turning one hundred eighty degrees, and came running down the hall to Tony, who stopped it just where he wanted it.

He had intended making test after test, each from farther and farther away. He went down five steps.

But what of Midnight? Midnight heard the squeaks. He bounded down the stairs, hit the cat flap full force, bounced back momentarily stunned. He shook his head. Then (remember—he is one smart cookie) abandoned the cat flap, raced upstairs, leaped onto the couch under the small screened window. He took several deep breaths, tensed his muscles, and launched himself at the screen. It broke loose, he landed on the tree branch outside. He flew down the tree trunk, hit the ground running, raced up the back steps and through the cat flap in the kitchen door.

By then Tony had started the second trial run. It started out okay, the amazing mouse obeying the **START**, squeaking happily, but directly opposite the door to the balcony, it suddenly went berserk. It stopped abruptly, whirling, faster and faster, a whirling dervish gone amok.

"I knew it, I knew it," howled Tony as he ran down the hall, frantically pressing **STOP** to no avail, "It was a nutty idea from the start. What kind of a human being would I be if I ever harmed Bunny? Hell, she's a saint. Now what? Catch that crazy mouse, then who knows."

Unfortunately for poor Tony, "who knows" (another life, maybe things would work out, etc.) was not to be. He didn't catch the mad mouse. He had come close, bent over, weaving back and forth, trying to grab the demented creature, when Midnight came flying down the hall, slammed into the mouse, sent it careening onto the balcony.

"Oh my God," wailed Tony, "where did he come from? I have to keep him from getting that mouse. He'll take it to Nibnose, and she'll figure it out." Out of breath, he ran onto the balcony, paused, looked in horror. Midnight had caught the mouse, was tearing it apart.

"Beat it," screamed Tony, lunging forward, bending down, trying to pull the mouse from Midnight. That was a stupid move. Midnight, claws bared, flicked his left front leg at Tony, raked his wrist, drew blood.

"Oh, you rotten son of a bitch," Tony wailed as he grabbed his wrist while falling hard against the grating. There was a sharp, cracking sound, the grating broke away, fell, over went Tony, Midnight, and what was left of poor polyester Mus Musculous Facsimulus Korea, an innocent accessory in the ill-gotten plan.

Less than five minutes later Bunny was consoling Clara as they got out of the car. "It's for the best, dear. She's finally at peace."

"I know," said Clara, meantime thinking, that makes two of us. Of course she would never forget Joe, but being constantly reminded to be true to him had been tough to take.

They went into the house, Clara to prepare Midnight's afternoon

snack, Bunny to tell Tony that the mother-in-law had died. He wasn't in the den. She went upstairs.

Clara was about to tell Midnight to "come and get it" when a blood-curdling scream rang through the house. Momentarily stunned, Clara quickly reacted.

"Oh my God," she shrieked, "he's murdering her, oh my God." She started to run, stopped, ran back to the knife rack, grabbed a long-handled carving knife, raced from the kitchen, and came within an eyelash of running Bunny through with the knife as they nearly collided at the foot of the stairway.

"A terrible accident," Bunny sobbed, "the balcony grating . . . Tony . . . in the rock garden, bleeding . . . call the ambulance . . . hurry . . . hurry." She ran to the front door, flung it open, ran out.

Holy smoke, thought Clara, Holy smoke as she ran into the den, dialed 911.

"Yes, an accident . . . send an ambulance . . . yes, the Ainsworth place on LaFayette Terrace . . . hurry."

She started out, realized she was still holding the knife, flung it to the floor, ran out, rushed to the rock garden, gasping for breath. There was the safety railing off to one side, Bunny kneeling down, cradling Tony's bloody head in her lap. Clara put her arms around Bunny's shoulders, hugged her, listened. Tony was whispering, a hoarse, horrible, gurgling kind of whisper.

"It's true, Bunny, I'm nothing but a lousy gambler. There's no . . . no Uncle Mike. I owe the casino. And I . . . I hope you'll forgive me but . . . I . . . I married you for your money."

"I don't care, darling, I don't care," Bunny sobbed, the blood staining her dress. "I love you, I love you. Don't die, darling, don't die, we can still have a wonderful life together."

Poor Clara, she began to sob.

"And," whispered Tony as poor Bunny bent down to hear, "I love you, too. I mean it. Now listen, honey . . ." Bunny sobbed louder, held him tighter, "the casino's not going to sue a dead man. And . . ." He gasped, struggling for breath, managed to go on. "There are two accident policies in one of those big bird books in the den. Mine's for a quarter million . . . take . . . when they pay . . . use it for a new dog pound . . . promise . . ."

"I promise, darling," sobbed Bunny, "but you're not going to die. We're going to Spain for our honeymoon and . . ."

The ambulance pulled up just then; the paramedics leaped out and took over. Tony was carefully placed on a stretcher, gently put in the ambulance. It sped away, sirens wailing. Several neighbors, drawn by the excitement, had come over, and one of them, trying to stay out of the way, was standing at the far end of the rock garden when she heard an odd choking sound. She looked toward where it came from, saw Midnight, hurried over, and saw that something was wrong.

"Clara," the neighbor called, "you better come over here. I think the cat has swallowed something."

Both Clara and poor Bunny hurried over.

"What's wrong, Midnight?" wailed Clara, reaching down and picking him up. Poor Midnight, eyes be-

seething her, uttered a horrible choking sound.

"That sounds serious," said the neighbor, "I think he should be taken to the humane society vet. I'll be glad to drive you."

"You go ahead, Clara," said Bunny, "I'll be all right. Maybe Jean will drive me to the hospital when I change my dress."

Jean, another neighbor, said of course she would.

There was bad news when they reached the humane society. There were only two volunteers there, women their sixties. It was the young vet's day at the Grand County facility, neither place able to afford a full-time vet.

"But look at him," wailed Clara, "he's going to choke to death. Can't you do that, you know, Heimlich whatyamacallit?"

Both women blanched. "Oh, I don't feel competent enough to try it on an animal; do you, Mabel?"

"Lord, no," said Mabel, "I'd be afraid to make it worse. But wait, how about Dr. Larkin?" She quickly explained that he was a retired otolaryngologist who volunteered three days a week at the humane society.

"Get him," Clara begged. "Where is he?"

Mabel thought it was one of his volunteer days at the library. She ran to the phone, called the library. Thank God, Dr. Larkin was there. He made it to the humane society in record time. He examined poor Midnight, who really sounded like one more horrible choking sound would be the last.

"I've never operated on a four-legged creature before," Dr. Larkin

said, smiling. "But this poor fellow needs immediate help. So, here goes."

Tony didn't make it, dying on the way to the hospital. Midnight did better, Dr. Larkin performing a feline laryngectomy. He removed a sharp piece of plastic with thin wires woven in it. Strange, they all thought, strange.

Just before sunset on that extraordinary day Clara managed to sneak outside. She made a thorough search of the rock garden, convinced that the accident policy had been taken out for only one reason. And something had gone haywire. And Midnight had somehow helped it go haywire.

If he could only talk, thought Clara. There was no chance of that. In fact, it was even more unlikely than before.

She found nothing to prove her contention that Tony had been setting things up to murder Bunny. By then the wind had blown away the furry polyester pieces that Midnight had clawed from the artificial mouse, and the remote had fallen on a rock, been shattered into dozens of pieces, meaningless to Clara.

Bunny managed to bear up during the private memorial for poor dear Tony (he was cremated), then she all but collapsed. Clara took over. She phoned Big Mo.

"An accident," he scoffed. "Who says so?"

"The coroner," snapped Clara. "I'll send you the newspaper story."

Which she did. I'll be damned, thought Mo. Still, I don't care what that coroner says, I think Tony took

the bridge. Maybe that widow wasn't rich, and with time passing he couldn't stand losing his good name. Poor Tony, a swell fellow, one of the best. Sure, the casino's not going to sue a dead man, what kind of publicity would that be? But there's still going to be a black mark against Tony's name.

Mo called his fellow premiums together once more, told them that Tony couldn't raise the dough to pay his markers, "took the bridge." Mo went on to say that it was up to them to pay off Tony's markers. He'd have done it for us, he said. Besides, he emphasized, it'll keep the casino from putting a limit on our markers.

Aspirited discussion followed but in the end two hundred twenty thousand was collected, Vince saying the casino ought to forget the interest. Slim, in the throes of a horrible losing streak, had to give a twenty thousand dollar I.O.U. as his share. Mo, making out very well lately, covered Slim's I.O.U.

The casino not only excused the interest, it did better. Here was a unique story—fellow players contributing to a fund to wipe out the debt of a deceased member, clear his name. It was a heaven-sent opportunity for some great publicity, Sarah (Wellesley '88), the casino's publicity director, told the manager, "Why not donate the money to charity, get a big play from the media?"

The manager thought it over, finally agreed that it was a great idea. Sarah contacted Mo, explained the deal.

"Everyone will come out ahead," she told him, "Poor Tony—how I

miss him, he was a charmer—you players, the casino, charity."

Mo polled the others. Okay, as long as it paid off Tony's markers. It did. The two hundred twenty thousand was donated to the six local soup kitchens and gratefully received (next to the casino, the soup kitchens were the busiest place in town). And the media gave it big coverage. Everyone came out ahead.

A tragedy with a happy ending? Clara Hogan was thinking that very same thing around seven o'clock in early October 1998 as she sat at her dressing table, primping for a big night out with Martin, the sixty-two-year-old widower who had impulsively comforted her while she anxiously waited the outcome of Midnight's delicate operation in June 1994. Martin's dear old Scamp, a nonagenarian on his last legs, had been brought in that very afternoon to be "put away." Actually, Clara comforted Martin also. There were tears all around.

While Midnight catnapped on the floor, husbanding his strength for his big night, now and then uttering a peculiar soft, wistful sound, Clara recalled the extraordinary events of the past four years. Think of it—and if His Nibs and the missus hadn't taken that same plane none of this would have happened.

There couldn't be the new humane society building (a small plaque on the front reads, "In memory of Tony Gregory, kind friend of God's animals"). Not that the quarter million had come easily, but now the poor strays had an air-conditioned place to spend their last days.

(The insurance company suspected chicanery, but after an exhaustive investigation it paid off, unable to come up with anything but an accidental death.)

And what if Midnight hadn't swallowed that whatever-it-was he swallowed? (I still think that thingamajig had something to do with His Nibs's death, but how it figured in we'll never know.) Bunny and Dr. Larkin wouldn't have met until it was too late. There was two of them henna-haired harpies ready to spring the trap on him.

Bunny and Dr. Larkin had left for New York that day, their second trip. The friendship now blossoming into romance had begun when Bunny thanked him for having saved Midnight's life and they realized they were kindred souls, each grieving for a lost spouse. "Of course we'll have separate hotel rooms, Clara," Bunny, blushing fiercely, told her before leaving on the first trip.

Clara leaned closer to the mirror. Yep, no doubt about it, she was getting better looking every day. Funny what love can do. She resumed meditating. Who would ever have imagined that His Nibs would end up as a big-time do-gooder. That really took the cake. (Sarah, too soft-hearted for the work she was in, learned of Tony's widow, wrote Bunny a dear sweet letter telling her how much everyone loved Tony, telling her of the contribution to the soup kitchens in his name. Poor Bunny—still refusing to believe that Tony would ever have intentionally harmed her—cried for a week.)

And how about me and Martin

(Martin was a retired coal miner, lived six miles from Hillsdale in a former coal company mining town, seldom came to Hillsdale). What if he had waited until the next day to come to the humane society? I'd still be an over-the-hill, stick-in-the-mud stay-at-home with nothing but fading memories of dear Joe to keep me alive. It's a funny world. You never know what's going to happen.

There's Midnight, too, I almost forgot. His swallowing that thingamajig, losing his cat voice, turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to the sly old dog. Sure put him in the catbird seat. Midnight could no longer meow or purr, a tragic development for a cat, one would think; shunned, ostracized, ridiculed by the entire species. So it would seem.

The only sound Midnight could utter was—well, it's almost impossible to describe, one had to hear it. It was . . . well, a kind of melancholy, mellifluous sound, sweet, sad, wistful. Whatever it was, it had put old Midnight in with the lady cats. Maybe they felt sorry for him. Who knows how cats think?

Tonight was a special night for Midnight. It was Susan's turn. She was the neighborhood femme fatale feline who, several years back, seemed to indicate to frenzied Midnight that the outlook was favorable. But when the poor sap made his move, Susan scathingly rejected him. ("Ha, I might have known. You're just like all the rest, you animal.") It was different now. Midnight, who hadn't meowed since that fateful day in 1994 was the cat's meow with Susan.

As Clara got up from the dressing table, quite pleased with her appearance, she suddenly thought of something. You know, it was kinda scary the ways things worked out, made you wonder if a higher authority wasn't pulling the strings.

Then Midnight—dreaming happily—uttered his uncatlike sound. Clara smiled. Use your common sense, woman. Why in heaven's

name would a higher authority waste time here in rundown little Hillsdale, worrying about a dumb animal swallowing a crazy thingamajig, when things like El Niño is raising hell all over the world?

Things just happen. Life's more harum-scarum than nice and tidy; always has been, always will be. Aristotle couldn't have said it any better.

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UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the September issue.

"Don't touch anything," warned Ben Thayer, the old sheriff of Walladega County. "This could be murder."

"Shore looks thataway," agreed Deputy Howie Wonders.

They stood gazing down upon Phil Therich, the late millionaire, who lay in his bloodstained, canopied bed, a bullet hole in his chest, a stiletto through his heart, a cord tightly bound around his throat, and his forehead dented by a heavy silver candlestick. An empty hypodermic syringe lay nearby on the floor beside a discarded pistol, and a suspicious, now-cold cup of cocoa rested on the bedside table.

"At least we got suspects," commented Sheriff Thayer.

"Yep," said Wonders, "a dozen of 'em. Er—sir—maybe we oughtta notify Mr. Horner, the coroner."

"Excellent suggestion," the sheriff said. "Mr. Therich appears to be very deceased."

"And—if you have no objections—we could call in the FBI."

"Y'know, I was jest thinkin' that very same thing, deputy." Together they descended the mansion's gleaming white staircase. "Don't nobody move!" ordered Sheriff Thayer. "This is gonna take awhile. First off, what are you people doin' here?"

One of the men answered. "We are the nephews of dear old Uncle Phil. He summoned us and our wives to discuss changes in his will. Unfortunately, someone seems to have done the old boy in before he could act on it—not that any of *us* would consider so horrible a deed."

"Changes? What changes?"

One of the women spoke up. "Well, not that it matters now, but he planned to disinherit us all and leave his millions to the Foundation to Protect and Preserve Wildlife in Walladega County. Uncle Phil was keen on nature—wayward chipmunks, orphaned robins, lost turtles, that sort of thing."

"I see," murmured the sheriff. "Well, we're bringin' in the best minds anywhere. They'll discover the truth. Howie, go phone the FBI."

Soon Hal Horner, the coroner, arrived and was led up the marble staircase to the fatal room. "Messy," he pronounced. "Can't recall ever seeing one exactly like this."

"What we need to know, doc," said Thayer, "is what killed him. Aside

from the murderer, others are guilty of attempted murder, or mutilating a corpse—something along that line.”

As Mr. Horner was selecting a new plastic bag of the proper dimensions, the doorbell chimed. It was Agent G. Mann of the FBI, who introduced himself. “Came as soon as I could,” he said breathlessly. “Need to act fast in these murder cases. Well, where’s the body?”

He was conducted to the scene. “Well, well, well,” he said in a reassuring, professional way. “I’ll start by checking all weapons for fingerprints and then check them against those of your suspects downstairs. This has the earmarks of an amateur hit.”

“About the body,” said Horner, “can I start on it?”

“Yes, yes, of course. Save the bullet for a ballistics check against that pistol lying there. And while you’re at it, sir, analyze the traces of whatever was in the syringe and also the contents of that blue Dresden porcelain cup. Time is of the essence.”

Hours later, as the nephews and their wives were polishing off the contents of Uncle Phil’s refrigerator, leaving inkstains everywhere from their recent fingerprinting, Agent Mann and Coroner Horner returned. “Fingerprints match on all weapons!” declared G. Mann gleefully. “We now know who did what with what.”

“My lab analysis proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that the cocoa was laced with arsenic and the hypodermic syringe held strychnine,” said Horner.

“I reckon we next need to know,” said Sheriff Thayer, “who went up there and when. I’ll question the nephews now.”

From the disjointed conversations the following facts emerged:

(1) Two nephews came by plane, two came by bus, and the other two drove. Donald was either Mr. North or the man who stabbed his uncle with the stiletto, neither of whom came by plane.

(2) Imogene’s husband went upstairs to “visit” his uncle just after Louise’s husband and just before Kathy’s husband (who was neither the man from Reno nor the one from Chicago). They included Andrew (who didn’t wield the candlestick), Mr. Parker (who didn’t arrive by plane), and the nephew from St. Louis (who also didn’t come by plane).

(3) Mr. North went upstairs sometime after Mr. Ruggles and just before Mr. Quigley. They included Bertrand, the nephew who fired the pistol (who was neither Imogene’s husband nor the nephew from El Paso), and the one from Denver (who was not married to Janice). Each of the three arrived by a different means of transportation.

(4) Charles (who was not the last to “visit” his uncle) was neither Jan-

ice's husband nor the man who wielded the candlestick. None of the three arrived by bus.

(5) Bertrand (who was not the nephew from Los Angeles) went upstairs just after Edward and just before Donald. They included Greta's husband, Mr. Olmstead, and the one who injected Uncle Phil with the syringe full of strychnine. Each arrived by a different means of transportation.

(6) Helene's husband, Mr. Quigley, and the nephew who tightened the cord around his uncle's neck came from Chicago, El Paso, and Reno, but none came by car. Andrew wasn't the man from Reno.

(7) Frank (who didn't come by car), Mr. Miller (who didn't come by plane), and the nephew from Los Angeles were the murderous three who put arsenic in Uncle Phil's cocoa, stabbed him with the stiletto, and tightened the cord about his throat.

"But who actually killed him?" asked Sheriff Ben Thayer.

"He died as a result of the injury inflicted by the nephew from Denver," said the coroner. "Nasty way to go."

Thayer produced his handcuffs and stepped forward to arrest _____ on suspicion of murdering his Uncle Phil Therich.

Which nephew actually killed his millionaire uncle? How?

See page 178 for the solution to the June puzzle.

.....

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The Saga of Tommy Brokenbridge

Dan A. Sproul

When a hurricane forms out in the Atlantic, the whole East Coast gets nervous. Hurricanes always appear headed directly for Florida when they start out. So the people in Florida from the Keys up to about Vero Beach get especially frantic.

This hurricane was still out there almost five hundred miles away, heading right toward Miami. It already had a name: Buford. Alphonsina, who had preceded Buford two weeks earlier, had spun off to the north and died out. But all Buford was doing was growing stronger and getting closer.

As you might imagine, nobody in the Miami area was happy about Buford—nobody except Tommy Brokenbridge.

Brokenbridge was not Tommy's real name. Tommy played the horses and the numbers. And he played them a lot. When he'd worked at the Bridge Hotel, to his bookmaker he was Tommy Bridge. When he quit the Bridge Hotel, his bookmaker changed Tommy's name to Tommy Brokenbridge. Just one of the ways bookies have of keeping track of their customers.

Later Tommy started working at one of the beach hotels. But forever after, he was Tommy Brokenbridge. I don't think I ever heard his real last name.

Tommy was happy about Buford

because of the numbers, which I'll get to in a minute.

My name is Joe Standard. I run Standard Investigations. You'll have a problem finding Standard Investigations in Dun & Bradstreet because most of my clientele don't provide the type of high profile cases needed to build the reputation and bottom line requisite to be listed by such a venerable firm. That is not to say that all of my clientele are lowlife scum, but I get a high percentage.

The problem is, I work cheap. I have to. With most of the people who come to me, it's chicken or feathers. None of them are flush very often. And when they are, they don't seem to stay that way long.

It all works out because I've got a low overhead operation. I have a small office in the back of the Sunbelt Realty Company. There's a cot in my office just under my big blow-up photograph of the illustrious Seattle Slew galloping to glory in his Preakness victory. The cot cuts down on the need for an expensive apartment. And, only two doors down, they put a shower in the can for me. Sunbelt Realty collects only minimal office rent. The place is located in a dangerous part of Miami—my being there helps to keep out the riffraff. So it kind of works out for everybody. But let me get back to Tommy.

I mentioned that Tommy was a gambler. He played the numbers every day—mostly the Cuban bolita. It paid out better than the Florida lottery, but he played that, too, and jai alai and the horses.

Tommy was not a handicapper in the real sense of the word. He just generated numbers: license plates, house numbers, street numbers, Social Security numbers, any numbers that struck his fancy—but most of all, hurricane tracking numbers. When Hurricane Andrew descended on the people of Miami and Homestead, Tommy tracked it all the way in. He hammered the Cuban bolita and also managed to hit five Cash Three's, three Play Fours, and two Fantasy Fives in the Florida lottery, eight trifectas at Miami jai alai, and an untold number of exactas and trifectas at Calder Race Course. Before Andrew destroyed Homestead, Florida, Tommy had won over one hundred twenty-eight thousand dollars. He bet the longitude and latitude numbers that were being reported on the hour after he plotted them on his hurricane map.

Tommy claims he could have made a million if all the action hadn't shut down when the hurricane hit. He managed to hold onto the money for over a year before he went bust and had to go back to work as a waiter at the New Horizons Restaurant just down from my office.

Tommy gave up his apartment to accumulate cash for the anticipated hurricane-betting frenzy that began when Alphonsina got her name. When he was flush, Tommy had bought a new Ford van with

captain's chairs. He parked the van every night in the Sunbelt Realty parking lot. That's where he slept. I let him use my car for twenty a week. When the radio in his van conked out and he couldn't get good numbers, it was a panic situation for him. But he refused to cough up any of his precious bankroll for a cheap radio.

Now, Tommy seemed like a good enough guy, so like some kind of boob I allowed him to camp out in my office. He used my TV and my desk to plot his numbers for an additional twenty a week. When Alphonsina hit the newscasts and started to get close, Tommy began to send it in: to the corner convenience store for Florida lottery tickets; to the track; to the outstretched hand of the constantly underfoot bolita runner.

Worst mistake I ever made. Having Tommy there was bad enough, but I didn't factor in the accordion. We weren't long into our arrangement when Tommy turned up one night, half in the bag, with his accordion. He insisted on playing "Roll Out the Barrel" and a medley of other polka tunes for me. I tossed him out and locked the door. He persisted with the serenade in the parking lot. At one point he went into a incompetent, drunken, barely recognizable rendition of "Amazing Grace." It was too ghastly for description.

These accordion nights, as they came to be known, were all too frequent. I tried desperately to get him to leave. But he wouldn't. He had paid me for the month, which still had two weeks to run, and he

wouldn't take back a partial payment.

"Look, Joe," he pleaded, "Buford will hit in a couple of days, long before the end of the month. By then I'll have all the green I can use. I'll go then and give you a bonus to boot."

"So how much have you grossed so far?" I asked him.

"Well, nothing yet," he admitted. "But that's because Alphonsina didn't come ashore. It will be different with Buford. It's headed right for us."

There is little doubt that Tommy's train had left the track some ways back. But I couldn't take any more accordion. I could hear the tuneless, discordant, unmelodious racket through the walls at night when he played the vile instrument in the van. So when Buford was about three days out, I enlisted Bullseye Larry, who owed me a favor, to steal the van while Tommy was down at the corner with his Florida lottery bets. Not to chop it up or send it to Venezuela, mind you, but long enough to dump the dreaded accordion in the Intercoastal. He could park the van up the street when he was done.

Unfortunately, Bullseye got caught with a hot Honda Prelude and ended up in the Dade County slammer before he was able to heist the van. Two important things happened next. The first thing was, Brokenbridge didn't seem to be collecting on any of his numerous bets.

"Something is wrong with the numbers, Joe," he confessed to me when Buford was but two days away. "I should be up a bundle by

now. It ain't workin' right. I don't think Buford is going to hit Miami."

The second thing was Tommy's bolita runner. I should tell you about him. He was the bag man for the local bolita and well known to everybody in the neighborhood because of a singular characteristic. Years ago he was working out in West Hialeah in the industrial parks at a zinc die cast place that made jealousy window cranks. He worked one of the big presses that cut the sprue away from the casting. Got his hand caught in the press one day. He lost all but his pinkie finger on the right hand. His little finger looked about eight inches long. And he couldn't bend it. It stuck straight out, ramrod stiff. The Cubans called him *Tubo de Relámpago*. Rough translation in English: Lightning Rod. But everybody else just called him Lightning.

Lightning was terrified of Buford. The closer the hurricane got, the more agitated he became. He began to spend his nights out at Tommy's van, drinking beer and enduring the accordion—strange behavior.

My part-time operative Frankie Swinehart, or Swine as he came to be commonly dubbed, had just landed a cushy job with Calder Race Course security. A position he'd struggled to obtain after many years of working drudge security in chilly car lots and crowd control at dangerous Cuban dances for the big firm in town. I was a bit surprised to see him come through my office door in uniform in the middle of a working day a half hour before post time.

He picked up Tommy's chart off

the lone office chair. "What's this?" he said.

"Ain't you supposed to be workin'?" I asked.

He threw the chart on the floor and sat down. "Got a big problem, Joe. Everybody's trying to move their horses out on account of the hurricane. We're goin' nuts over at Calder."

"I can imagine. But what are you doin' here?"

"There's been an accident in the backstretch—Arnie Ritter."

"Arnie! What happened?"

Arnie was a horse trainer. Years ago I was an assistant trainer under Buddy Wayne. I kept my track license up over the years and did odd jobs for some of the trainers in the backstretch. Arnie Ritter was one of them. He was a good trainer and a longtime friend.

"Arnie asked Jimmy Cox to let me off to come over and see you. He knows me, and you know each other. That big Glitterman colt Arnie's been prepping gave him a shot in the chest. Broke some ribs and collapsed a lung. He's in pretty bad shape." The accordion music started up out in the parking lot. "Jeesus, what's that racket?" Swine asked.

I told him about Tommy and Lightning and surmised that the two idiots had got an early start on a beer-drinking accordion night.

Swine continued, informing me that Arnie didn't want me to waste time visiting him in the hospital. "Arnie's son Bill has twelve head at Fairgrounds in Louisiana," Swine said. "Arnie wants you to make sure his two colts in the Calder backstretch get out before the hurricane.

He wants them shipped to Bill in Louisiana. Arnie told me to tell you that he has it fixed with the horseman's bookkeeper to cut you a check for fifteen hundred to arrange transportation."

"I don't know nothin' about arranging transportation," I readily confessed. "Where am I supposed to find transportation?"

Swine shrugged. "How tough can it be? Find somebody with a horse trailer willing to take two head to Fairgrounds for fifteen hundred. Thing is, you ain't got much time. That hurricane is supposed to come ashore around midnight."

From the parking lot came a barely recognizable accordion interpretation of "Easter Parade," vocal by Lightning Rod in slurred Spanish. "You got any good news for me?" I asked.

Swine pushed his bony body up from my client chair. "Yeah, I got to get back to work. That guy out there singin' sounds like somebody wounded him in the throat."

Up to now I hadn't worried much about the hurricane. I'd been through a few. When Andrew hit, I was holed up at a hurricane party in the Surfer's Bar and Grill just around the corner. They don't normally have much surf in Florida, and it's doubtful that a genuine, actual surfer ever set foot in Surfer's Bar and Grill. But it was a hell of a party. We were all rather relaxed, so we just sort of crammed into the dining room when the front half of the roof blew down the street.

Remember I told you that Tommy was the only one happy about the hurricane? I might have been

mistaken. Buford was less than twelve hours away. No matter which TV station I turned to, the weathermen were positively orgasmic. They seemed to be on a hurricane high. There was much grinning and jumping about. How the weather people were able to repress the urge to break out into joyous, hysterical laughter is a mystery—and more, a real tribute to their professionalism. Documentaries and specials were presented endlessly while hurricane watches and hurricane warnings choked off scheduled broadcasting. Anywhere up and down the coast from Key West to Vero Beach you were already a victim unless you had stockpiled a two months' supply of canned goods, flashlight batteries, bottled water, and plywood sheets, and, oh yes, portable radios and a bathtub full of water to flush the john. They neglected to mention that given all the hysterics it would require a trip to North Carolina to find a retailer with items such as candles and batteries still on the shelf; provided, that is, one were able to get onto a major thruway going north. And all I had to do was get two horses to Louisiana.

I do have a company car, a '65 Mustang convertible. Me and the Mustang crawled north toward Calder amidst the unwashed, without-plywood-sheets, no-bottled-water, batteryless rabble who were trying to put Buford in their rear view mirrors.

Calder was practically abandoned. Diehard, dedicated horseplayers were clearly a solid minority in Miami this day. There were

just a few hundred fans sprinkled about. In the backstretch it was a different story—one titled Pandemonium. It looked like a horse push-pull-drag-get-'em-in-the-van contest.

I found Jimmy Cox at track security. He had Arnie's check from the bookkeeper. I jammed it in my rear pocket. It was about two hours before the banks closed; after that, everything would be buttoned up awaiting Buford. I headed down the shed row to Arnie's barn. I propositioned everybody loading a horse. There were a couple of vacancies going to Monmouth but nothing else. And nobody was heading for Fairgrounds.

Arnie had one stall converted for use as a feed room. It contained some feed and hay along with assorted training paraphernalia. Tack adorned one wall. In addition there was a small table with a single chair. I plopped down to ponder my next move. A sign to the right of the stall opening, at eye level, caught my attention:

*No good deed goes
unpunished.*

ANONYMOUS.

I read it several times. There aren't many things certain in this world, but if there is one universal truth, Anonymous has grasped the essence of it. Anybody in the P.I. business will testify to that. Anybody in any business, I suspect, would agree. You want tangible proof, look at my current good deed status.

I checked the two colts in the

next stalls over. They seemed okay. I went back to the tiny table to study the situation. I didn't want to let Arnie down, but I was clearly out of options. I put my head in my hands and cogitated over my next move.

"This is a stickup!"

I uncovered my eyes to behold a husky fellow with a bent nose standing in the stall entrance with an adhesive-backed deodorant in hand.

"Who are you?" the visitor asked. "Where's Arnie?"

I explained my presence in the stall, which I noticed did have a subtle stench about it. I asked the stickup man to respond in kind.

"George Foreman," he said, extending his hand.

"Hold on," I said. "You ain't George Foreman, you don't look nothin' like him."

"Not the boxing George Foreman," he explained. "I'm the horse training George Foreman. I keep my string a coupla stalls down the shedrow."

George asked after Arnie's health and then explained that his dog Alfred had wandered off earlier and had elected to dump a load in the corner of Arnie's office stall. Unfortunately, some of it went up under the stall partition and couldn't be retrieved; hence, the stickup.

"In the supermarket I had to fight off several thousand crazed women swinging water jugs and flashlights to get this deodorant," George said. "I hope Arnie appreciates it."

George and his string were leaving within the hour for Belmont in New York. He was sympathetic to my plight but could offer little help.

He prepared the deodorant and pressed it onto the back wall under a nylon halter. He wished me good luck and disappeared through the stall opening.

A few seconds later he returned. "I just remembered something," he said. "My sister lives in West Palm Beach, about fifty miles up the road. She has a few hunter jumpers she keeps up there. She's got a two-horse trailer she almost never uses. She might let you use it if you have some way to get it. If you want, I'll give her a call."

I tossed this idea about. Arnie had a half-ton pickup, but he had the keys at the hospital, and all the car switching and the drive to West Palm would eat up a lot of time and time was quickly running out. Besides, who would drive the truck to Louisiana? Then I had my inspiration: Tommy Brokenbridge. He had a van with a V8 and a trailer hitch. He could really use seven hundred and fifty dollars. I know what you're thinking, but I had to toss something to George's sister for the trailer and I deserved something for my anguish. Besides, I knew Tommy was desperate enough to work cheap. And best of all, him and the evil accordion would be out of my life. I made a mental note to give Tommy only half up front—three hundred fifty. That would give him some incentive not to sell the trailer before he started back. There was little doubt he would return. Florida numbers betting was the only life he knew. It was a lifestyle not easily accommodated elsewhere.

George cleared it with his sister and gave me written directions to

her place in Wellington, a horse community in West Palm Beach. Swine agreed to check on Arnie's colts while I enlisted Tommy's aid.

Going south was a breeze, just a few cars. A check issued on Calder Race Course is solid gold at any bank in Florida, but I've suffered a few unfortunate setbacks in my banking career over time. In the interest of haste and to avoid problems I bypassed my own bank and cashed it at the bank it was written on. With the money warming my pocket, I headed back to the office and the Sunbelt parking lot to look for my musical friend Tommy.

I could see a problem developing. Tommy was no doubt the most ceaseless nitwit I'd ever run across in my travels. But he was psychotic in his habits. He did everything by the numbers. He was methodical in the time and sequence of his bets. He timed his trip to the corner store for lottery tickets to the second. What I'm saying is, he's predictable. Tommy runs a tighter schedule than the airlines. When I had left earlier, he'd started an early accordion night. If anything, he should be staggering around with the accordion or passed out in his van by now. But the van was gone. Something was amiss. Then came more trouble: Huey, Dewey, and Louie.

At least that's what everybody called them behind their backs. Humberto, Diaz, and Louis ran the Cuban bolita in Little Havana. Never was clear who the big cheese was, but I always suspected Huey. Diaz and Louis always dressed elegantly—suit and tie, shined shoes, the whole gangster bit. Huey was dif-

ferent. Braced on either side by the well-manicured Dewey and Louie, Huey stood before me in my own office smiling at me under his ragged, burrito-infested mustache, sporting ragged denim shorts and shower thongs. His English was pretty good.

"Where he es, Brokenbreedge?" Huey wanted to know.

I went around my desk and sat down. "I got one word for you guys: *Adios!*"

I knew they probably wouldn't mess with me. They were businessmen first. As such, they were aware of my own reputation and connections. They commenced to argue among themselves in Spanish. Even in Spanish the word *relámpago* is tough to mistake. As the argument heated up, *relámpago* seemed to punctuate every other sentence.

It didn't take long to figure out what was happening here. The head office of the Cuban bolita wouldn't be out trying to collect from Tommy. They had knucklebusters for that. They were looking for Lightning Rod. That could only mean one thing. Lightning had made off with their collection money.

It fit together. Lightning was terrified of the coming hurricane, and Tommy was near broke. It seemed pretty clear that Tommy and Lightning had absconded with the swag.

Huey then asked me if I had seen Lightning Rod lately. I told him the truth: that Lightning and Tommy were here earlier but not now. The group pondered that for a bit, then left. They were still discussing the situation at the top of their collective voices well into the parking lot. There was no chance that Huey

and company would bring the cops into this. Lightning was away clean, or so it seemed.

None of this was helping me at all. I made a call to George's sister and told her I wouldn't be coming for the trailer. I guessed the only thing left was to sit and brave it out. I made a call to Calder and talked to Jimmy Cox in security. I told him that Arnie's horses were staying.

"We're putting all the horses still here into the receiving barns where we can button up and keep an eye on them," he told me. "You want me to have Swine take Arnie's horses over now?" he asked.

I told him to go ahead. I called Arnie at the hospital, but he was in surgery. There wasn't much left to do but amble over to the Surfer and wait for Buford. I clicked on the TV. Buford was still about eighty miles out but had speeded up. New predictions indicated Miami didn't have seven hours left. It was now estimated to be less than three hours. As I watched, the television began to beep, and a message printed across the bottom of the screen. At the same time the now weary weatherman seemed reinvigorated.

"This just in from the Weather Center. Buford has veered sharply north. The indication now is that it will miss the Miami area. . . . I repeat. . . . Buford will miss the Miami area. Where, or if, it will come ashore has not been passed along to us as yet. Stand by; we will try to get a prediction on that."

So Tommy had been right about why his numbers didn't work. The

hurricane wasn't going to hit Miami. I locked up and went around the corner to the Surfer's Bar to watch the outcome on satellite TV with a Budweiser in my fist. I made a mental note to get up early so I could tend to Arnie's horses.

The next day word on the street was that Lightning had made off with over eight thousand dollars. In other news, Buford had come ashore briefly. The hurricane had veered in about a hundred twenty miles north of Miami at Hobe Sound, bounced around some, then headed northeast and out to sea. Later on in the day the news crew came on television to report the damage. For the most part it was just a few signs knocked down, with only one serious incident. There were few cars on the highway because of the relentless warnings. But it was reported that two Miamians driving a van with no radio did not receive any warning that the hurricane had veered north and was headed directly for them. On U.S. 1, just past Hobe Sound, their van was lifted and tossed into forty feet of Hobe Sound inlet water. Tommy, Lightning, the accordion, and the bag money went in the drink together. Only Tommy and Lightning came out. It was reported that the two behaved rather badly and had to be restrained by police from diving back into the tortuous sea to regain their possessions.

I still don't know if all the hysteria is warranted—but it looks like there might be some merit in at least having a radio.

Claud

David Braly

I first saw him when I was seven years old. A realtor who specialized in country estates was showing us the living room of a house on a seventy acre nonworking “farm” in Connecticut. It was a red brick house with white storm shutters, and nearby there was a gentle rock-strewn brook that tumbled quietly through an ancient oak grove. The house would be ample for my parents, my two sisters, and myself without requiring a housekeeper or other help. The living room had a vaulted ceiling, built-in bookcases, a maple floor, a stone fireplace, and tall, clear, very large multipaned windows. The broker, a perpetually smiling middle-aged man of lofty stature and prematurely silver hair, was pointing to a three-pronged electrical outlet as proof that the old house had been rewired. Being a child, I saw no significance in the fact, since the wires were inside the walls, i.e. invisible, and therefore it shouldn’t matter whether they were old or new, but my father seemed pleased to hear it. I assumed that he was only being polite. My father—and my mother too, for that matter—were polite to a fault. It was at that moment that a lanky, slightly stooped man of sixty or more years dressed in a denim workshirt and faded overalls walked through the front door. He nodded to us as he crossed the living room toward a door that led into the hall. He disappeared through the door.

For a moment everyone was too stunned to say anything.

“That’s just Claud Heister,” said the broker at last. He laughed. “He comes with the house.”

My parents laughed, so I and my sisters—although too young to understand the joke—did also. The broker resumed showing the remainder of the property, and Claud Heister was forgotten.

After the tour my father told the broker that he would call tomorrow to let him know if he was interested in making an offer: I was hoping that he would be interested. I really liked the place. There was plenty of room to play and to ride the horse that I believed I would receive someday. My sisters, who at five and four were too young to understand what was happening, watched and listened to the conversation without perception or bias. But I wanted him to buy.

My parents had been actively looking for a house in Connecticut for almost a month. It was to serve as a weekend and holiday retreat from our home in New York City. Most of our friends owned retreats in Connecticut or the Hamptons. For me, the place we had seen that day was perfect.

It turned out that my view wasn’t an isolated one. After we’d all slid

into my father's Imperial, my father asked Mother what she thought of the farm. "I think it's perfect," she said.

"Good," he said. "I feel the same. It's larger than we'd discussed, and will cost more than we'd budgeted, but we can swing it."

Swing it they did. Several days of negotiation ended with the purchase. There was a further delay in our going there while Mother acquired exactly the right sort of furniture she wanted for the living room, dining room, master bedroom, and the two bedrooms that we kids would occupy. Furniture for the other rooms could wait, but Mother insisted on acquiring the basic stuff immediately.

Finally, after days of impatient waiting, moving day arrived. This was the long-awaited moment when the movers would haul all the furnishings from the storage warehouse in the Bronx to the house in Connecticut. They would follow the Imperial, and later Mother would direct them in the placement of the new furniture. Actually, because Mother had complete charge of where things went, there was little need for the rest of us, but Father was the family's only licensed driver and they couldn't have kept us children away without enduring more crying, whining, and complaining than it would have been worth.

When we reached the farm, my father parked beyond the front porch so the movers would have plenty of room. He had already cautioned us children to stay out of the way and out of the house, and he did it again right after we left the car. When Father went to open the front door of the house, he found it unlocked. He looked surprised but not concerned. The movers backed their van up to the front porch and began unloading. I remember that the first item they took out was the long mahogany cabinet that now belongs to my sister Alicia. Mother followed the movers into the house to show them where she wanted it, while Father strolled over to a garage that once had been a barn. My sisters and I stayed to watch the movers.

The movers came out and went back in with another item while Mother remained inside. The process was repeated several times before she came out again. It was while she was outside pointing to the piece of furniture she next wanted taken inside that Claud came out the front door onto the porch. When Mother turned and saw him, she sort of gasped. Evidently he'd been inside the house the whole time that they'd been taking in furniture. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was in my room and didn't hear you folks arrive or I woulda been out earlier to help you."

Before she could say anything, one of the movers said, "We can always use some free help."

Claud went right to it, helping move the lighter pieces, and Mother said nothing. Of course, what could she say? She didn't know what he was doing there, but she wasn't really sure that he had no business being there because sometimes Father arranged for things without telling her. She tried to ignore the circumstances and treat him like he was just

another one of the movers. After the lighter stuff had been taken inside, he disappeared. I doubt that she forgot about him exactly, but I suspect, knowing her, that she refused to admit to herself that the whole situation wasn't resolved by his temporary disappearance.

When Father reappeared, she mentioned nothing about it to him. Of course she was still busy, getting the last pieces of furniture placed just right and getting dinner fixed at the same time. Part of the problem with country living is the lack of pizza delivery systems.

Dinner was served in the small dining room. The living room was to one side, and a door that led into the big kitchen and pantry was to the other. The room was more long than wide, with cream-colored walls and a couple of windows with a splendid view of the countryside. The table was a long, heavy, elaborately carved black walnut piece Mother had found in a store that specialized in antique furniture. It dated from the mid-nineteenth century. She took great delight in anticipating the first setting of it. It didn't matter that eight chairs came with the table but there were only five of us.

Or rather, as it turned out, six of us.

Just as she finished setting the table, Claud reappeared. He walked into the kitchen where she and my older sister were, sniffed the air, and asked, "What're we having?"

"Uh . . . roast beef with candied yams and sweet peas."

"That oughta be good. I ain't had a good female-cooked meal since this place went on the market four months ago. Mrs. Carstairs could sure cook up a fine dinner. Made good waffles for breakfast, too. Do you make waffles for breakfast, Mrs. Hinton?"

"Uh . . . yes . . . sometimes."

"Good. I sure like waffles for breakfast. Of course, anything you fix is fine with me. I ain't particular. How long before dinner's ready?"

"Ready? Oh, about another five minutes."

"Just enough time to wash my hands." He left, and Mother went looking for Father. Unfortunately Father had found something urgent that needed doing outdoors, and she couldn't find him. She didn't have a full five minutes to look because she needed to set another place at the table.

By the time Father finished his odd job we were all seated at the table: Mother, myself, Alicia, Janet, and Claud. Father sort of flinched when he saw Claud there, but he didn't ask any questions or say a word about it. Claud looked up at him, smiled, and nodded, and Father stalled and nodded back at him and then took his seat at the table. Father looked at Mother and then at Claud and then back at Mother, but he said nothing. While eating, though, he kept sneaking glances at Claud.

Nobody said much during dinner other than to ask people to pass this or pass that. But it wasn't because of Claud. Mother and Father believed it impolite to talk during meals, and so it wasn't done. Claud must have been of the same opinion because he didn't say anything either.

After dinner Mother began clearing away the dishes, and Father went into the living room. He pretended as though he were intent on surveying his new property from the big living room windows, but actually the tight clasp and unclasp of his hands behind his back signaled that he was bursting with questions that his politeness wouldn't allow him to ask. Claud stopped in the living room after he left the table.

"Do you play cards, Mr. Hinton?" he asked.

"Cards? No. No, I don't. Why? Do you?"

"Mostly patience. Sometimes, when there's someone around who's game, a little poker."

"Uh-huh. Well, I . . . I don't play cards."

"Too bad. Mr. Carstairs could play a mean hand of draw poker. So could Mr. Tillman."

"Tillman? I don't recognize that name."

"He used to own this place."

"You mean before Mr. Carstairs?"

"Yes. Not just before him. There were two owners between them. . . . Well, I'll just head for my room. I'm in the middle of a good western novel. Do you read westerns, Mr. Hinton?"

"No. Nonfiction, a few mysteries, that's about it."

"I see. Well, I'll just head for my room."

Father watched him go. More than that, my usually polite and circumspect Father shadowed him part of the way. He had reason, though: he wanted to discover which room was Claud's so he wouldn't accidentally walk into it uninvited.

Which isn't to say that my parents immediately accepted this puzzling situation. They did not. On the contrary, I learned much later, they stayed up half the night discussing it. Mostly they tried to recall exactly what the real estate broker had said about Claud Heister and the way he'd said it. They finally went to bed after agreeing that the following morning Father would drive into New York to see the broker and discover exactly who Claud was and what he was doing in their new house. One thing only Father was certain of: there was no mention of Claud Heister in the real estate sales agreement.

The next morning Mother fixed waffles for breakfast. Normally she didn't. Waffles were always something of a treat. Usually we had Quaker Oats or cream of wheat on cold mornings, and pancakes, bacon, and eggs or cold cereal on other mornings. It was obvious that she'd made them for Claud. It was the polite thing to do, of course.

"My oh my," he said after he'd tasted one, which he'd saturated with Brer Rabbit molasses. "That is certainly a first-class waffle, Mrs. Hinton."

"Is it as good as Mrs. Carstairs' waffles?"

He took another bite, chewed very carefully, his eyes up at the ceiling, as though carefully weighing the question with both his brains and his tastebuds. We all watched him and waited for his verdict.

"You know," he said at last, "I believe they are as good."

Everybody breathed in relief. Even Father appeared pleased by the judgment.

That did not prevent him from driving into New York to see the broker. It did not help his disposition that the broker was out of town showing a house and that he had to wait at the man's office until midafternoon.

I was not present for the meeting, of course, and only learned about it years later. Although polite as ever, Father was adamant in demanding an explanation. The broker said he'd told Father that Claud came with the house, but Father was having none of that. He had taken it as a joke, he said. Anyone would take such a comment as a joke. I don't know what the broker thought he was doing when he tried to excuse the situation so lamely because obviously the effort would fail. Nobody would believe himself legally informed by such a casual statement.

In the end the broker had to provide a full explanation that made some sort of sense. I say "some sort" because no complete sense was ever made of the situation.

According to the broker, Claud Heister had lived in the house for at least three decades. No one—or more accurately, no one the broker knew of—was exactly sure how long he'd been there. He literally came with the house. He was not mentioned in the contracts, but he was there. Every new owner had been surprised in turn by his presence (apparently it was a practice of both seller and broker not to inform the buyer of everything he was getting) but had eventually accepted it.

"They recognized that Claud is a benefit," said the broker.

"A benefit? How is it beneficial to have a man we don't know living in our house?"

"Your *country* house," corrected the broker. "You're usually not there."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Claud's presence is a deterrent to thieves and vandals. Your house is safer because he's in it. And when you are there, he's barely noticeable. He occupies one bedroom."

"But he's not a member of my family."

"Look at it this way. You have a watchman on your property, guarding it day and night twelve months of the year, paid for by the government."

"The government?" asked Father.

"He lives on his Social Security. You pay him nothing. In return, your house is protected. You suffer no real inconvenience at his hands. All you give up is one bedroom in a five-bedroom house."

"But . . . but he isn't part of my family."

"Mr. Hinton, he's lived there for at least three decades. At *least* three. Do you really want to be responsible for evicting this man from his home?"

Of course that was the best argument in the world to use with my father. He caved. Claud became a permanent fixture at the Hinton country house—as he'd been before the Hintons had the country house.

Naturally, at the time, my sisters and I knew nothing of these events or the dismay produced in my mother when she learned we had acquired a permanent houseguest. What we did know was that Claud was always at the farm. In the way of children, we did not question his presence, did not question who he was, did not question what his function might be. The adult world was filled with things too complex for us to understand, so there were things we seldom questioned and this especially included why certain adults happened to be in certain places. We always assumed, for example, that a waitress was a waitress because that's what she was, not because it was what she chose to be or what she had to be. We never looked into anyone's motives for being in a certain job or a certain place. Claud was Claud and he was at the country house; that was all there was to it.

Perhaps some questions might have formed in our minds if we had come to know him better. But we never did come to know Claud. He appeared at meals; otherwise we saw him infrequently. Sometimes we would see him walking toward the front gate, going somewhere, and sometimes we would see him coming from the front gate, coming from somewhere, but he never did anything on the farm itself. He never worked or played. He just came and went. Indoors, other than at meals, the only times we saw him—and they were seldom—were when he was seated at the otherwise empty dining table playing patience. On those occasions he wore a green plastic eyeshade.

It was because of Claud that we kept the country house when Father experienced severe financial trouble during a recession. He needed money, and he wanted to sell the farm. But he couldn't because of Claud. Father was simply too much of a gentleman to allow a broker not to warn a potential new buyer about Claud, yet obviously nobody would buy it knowing that a permanent houseguest came as part of the package. So we kept the farm and Father barely avoided bankruptcy. It put him through the wringer. In the end it turned out well because Father survived without selling the farm.

Claud died last summer. It was sudden and unexpected. He was walking down the road and just dropped dead of a heart attack. The doctor said that sort of heart attack seldom happened. Father claimed it was the best way to go. I'm not so sure; I think I would want some warning.

Father paid for Claud's burial in the nearest cemetery and for a nice headstone after a quick investigation confirmed that he had no family.

It was only then, when Father was going through Claud's papers in his room (the court appointed him and a local lawyer co-executors) that he found the promissory note. Forty years earlier it had been given to Claud Heister, farmhand, by the then owner of the farm, John Williams. The note was for accumulated back wages, which Williams was unable to pay, amounting to two thousand three hundred dollars. The interest was eight percent a year, compounded annually. An attached

statement signed by Williams stipulated that Claud Heister would be allowed to live on the farm rent-free until the note and interest were paid and that the promise was binding on Williams' heirs, assigns, and other successors in ownership of the farm.

We have since wondered, and probably will wonder ever after; whether Claud had slyly refrained from mentioning the debt to later owners after it had been forgotten, realizing that the free room was a better deal than the money (although the money would have amounted to almost fifty thousand dollars by the time he died), and if someone ever did order him to leave he could always produce the note and collect the money. But maybe that wasn't the reason he'd never referred to the note. Maybe he'd simply been too polite to mention it.

SOLUTION TO THE JUNE "UNSOLVED":

Dudley in the blue suit was the Colossal Giant who, during an argument, tossed floppy-eared Folly into the vat.

NAME	SUIT	CAP	CHORE	ADDITIVE
Arley	brown	green	dusting	cinnamon
Bubbly	purple	red	sweeping	mustard
Cholly	orange	blue	cook	horseradish
Dudley	blue	orange	laundry	ginger
Everly	red	brown	beds	sassafras
Folly	yellow	purple	set table	bergamot
Golly	green	yellow	fireplace	camomile

That's a Switch

John H. Dirckx

At twilight the crickets and frogs began serenading one another, the bats made their first low flights over the tree-tops, and Midgy Lunken emerged from her underground burrow into the shadows of the night. Everything she wore had been salvaged from trashcans or stolen from careless shopkeepers. Everything she possessed in the world she carried in a dingy, threadbare knapsack.

Her home was the transformer vault of an abandoned tire factory where mice ate anything not stored in metal and sometimes bit her while she slept on her bed of newspapers and rags. Midgy Lunken was just under five feet tall, with eyes like a ferret's and a nose like a blob of putty. It was three weeks since she'd washed her hair, in the ladies' room at the bus station, when both of the female security guards were off on the same night.

She started her nightly round at the trash receptacle behind the Elite Bakery. Working in the dark, she searched a long time before finding and consuming a couple of stale rolls. Then she emptied a heavy-duty plastic garbage bag of its contents and set off to fill it with aluminum cans picked up from the wayside and salvaged from the hundred or so trashcans along her regular route.

She kept to the alleys, the un-

lighted passages, the dark sides of walls and fences. It wasn't other nocturnal predators she feared—on them she could exercise nails and teeth, and fists hardened by hunger into hammers. But the police were merciless toward vagrants, and she had vowed not to survive another stretch in the workhouse.

Around two o'clock in the morning, with her bag full of cans, she slipped through a hedge and followed her usual course along Pemberton Avenue, a.k.a. Business Route 5. A high chain-link fence followed the curve of the road here, hugging the gravelly shoulder so closely as to leave no room for pedestrians. Midgy Lunken's path lay between the fence and a dense thicket that cloaked the slope rising sharply to her right, above which the rooflines of houses showed vaguely against the velvet sky.

The traffic on Route 5 never quite died down at any hour of the night. Guided by the lights of passing cars, Midgy made her way with ease through the shadows. All the same, she nearly fell over the figure huddled motionless on the path before a stray beam of light limned it momentarily.

A hungry belly has no conscience, much less a scrap of compassion. Midgy had rolled a few drunks in her day. Her only concern was that some sharp-eyed driver would see

her at it and have the police on the scene before she could get away. She knelt quickly in the mud and ran her hands over the prostrate form. A man—a big man, muscular, but just now limp as a rag. A wallet where it ought to be. She snatched it and scampered back along the path by which she'd come, trailing her bag of empty cans noisily behind her.

At length she stopped under a viaduct to examine her spoils by the feeble glow of a streetlight. Besides the usual cards and papers, the wallet contained a substantial wad of bills. With many a glance over her shoulder she counted them out—sixty-eight dollars' worth of them.

Midgy Lunken dropped the plundered wallet down a storm sewer and left her bag of cans tumbled in the gutter for somebody else to find and redeem. She padded off into the night, her mind astir with plans for spending her windfall. First a visit to the coffeeshop at the bus station. Then a bath and a four dollar bed for the rest of the night at the Brethren's Hostel. And in the morning, Eleanor's Beauty Salon as soon as it opened—if they'd let her in.

Not long after first light, two people on their way to work called the police on cellular phones to report that they'd seen what looked like a man lying inert against the fence alongside Route 5. A patrol crew dispatched to the scene found the dead body of an adult white male in his thirties facedown on the narrow path that ran along the

fence on the side away from the road. Death had apparently resulted from a severe head wound, which had crushed in the right temple. No identification was found on the body.

When Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn reported for duty at eight A.M., his immediate superior, Lieutenant Savage, met him in the hall outside his office. "Don't take off your jacket," said Savage. "We've got a citizen down, over in Harmony Heights."

Auburn had no trouble finding the place along Route 5 where the body was lying, covered now by a blanket and surrounded by an investigative team. Figuring out where they'd parked and how they had made their way to the site on the other side of the fence took considerably more effort.

A chance glimpse of a strip of yellow plastic tape fluttering in the morning breeze led him to a cul-de-sac under a viaduct where a cruiser and an evidence van were parked. As he pulled in next to them, another van, belonging to the coroner's office, stopped behind him with a squeal of brakes. A dark-haired, heavy-featured man stepped out and pulled a camera case and a square leather grip after him with an air of urgency.

"Turn off your siren, Nick," said Auburn. "They don't call you for live ones, remember?"

Nick Stamaty's greeting was goodnatured but sardonic. "I want to get in there before Kestrel has him posted and pickled and shoved in a box."

Together they walked along the

fence and passed under the yellow tape with which the first officers on the scene had cordoned off the area. Three ten-year-olds, who should have been on their way to school, were hovering near the tape, seeing nothing but hiding their disappointment under a brave show of nonchalance.

Kestrel, the police evidence technician, was making measurements with a spring tape and entering them on a sketch map mounted on a clipboard. The older of the two uniformed officers stood over the body while the other combed the dense growth of brush and weeds that covered the slope overhanging the path, looking for a castoff weapon or a wallet emptied of cash. All three lanes northbound on Route 5 were busy, but the pace was so brisk that most of the drivers probably didn't notice anything unusual going on on the other side of the fence.

Auburn stooped and uncovered the dead man's face briefly. "Any I.D. yet?" he asked the nearer patrolman.

"No, sir. Somebody cleaned him out good."

Stamaty squeezed past Auburn with his camera and took the first of several pictures. Kestrel, habitually dour and reticent, went on with his work as if there were nobody within a mile but him and the body.

"Nothing on him at all?" Auburn asked him.

Kestrel fished a clear plastic bag out of his field kit, which lay open on the path, and held it up for Auburn to see without really offering it to him. It contained a ring of keys,

a few coins, a cheap pen, a quartz wristwatch, and two sizes of stubby screwdriver.

"Some kind of a mechanical type?" suggested Auburn.

"His hands would tell you that," said Kestrel. "Calluses, abrasions, ground-in grit, nails broken off to the quick . . ." Auburn and Stamaty exchanged glances.

"You got his blood type yet?" asked Stamaty with a coy twinkle in his eye.

"Not my department." Nobody knew whether Kestrel's inability to see a joke was genuine or just a colossal put-on. But none of his colleagues could remember ever having heard him laugh.

"How did he get here?" queried Auburn. "He didn't walk in here with his head bashed in like that. And it would take four men and a boy to hoist him over that fence from the highway, even if the traffic over there ever died down long enough."

"We figured a couple, three guys jumped him in here sometime last night," said the patrolman. "Grabbed his wallet and took off."

"Why in here?"

"They were probably just hanging out, and he picked the wrong night to take a shortcut."

"Is he stiff yet?"

"Getting there," said Kestrel. "There's no dew under him. He's been here since midnight anyway."

"Did you see any blood anywhere except right by the body?"

"Zero."

Auburn followed the path beyond the body for a couple of hundred yards. Owing to the curve of the

highway, he was out of sight of the others by the time he reached the point where the path petered out under the Slade Street overpass. He made his way thoughtfully back. The patrolman on the hill was having a rough time struggling through tangles of wild honeysuckle and brushwood, and finding nothing but litter for his pains.

Kestrel and Stamaty were going over the body together, the blanket now draped over the fence to screen them from the passing cars. "The sooner we get him downtown and roll some prints," said Stamaty, "the closer we'll be to an I.D." He made an entry in his notebook.

"Let me see that bunch of keys," said Auburn. Legally the dead man's personal effects belonged to the coroner until identity and cause of death had been established. Without getting up from his squatting position, Stamaty twisted on his heels and passed the plastic bag up to Auburn. Auburn fished out the keys.

"The knockout plugs are gone," said Kestrel without looking up.

"I'll bet this car is parked less than a quarter of a mile from here," said Auburn. "He didn't live around here. Not if he made a living working with his hands."

"What would he be doing around here at night?" asked Stamaty.

Auburn shrugged. "Probably not selling Bibles. Maybe a drug deal that went sour. While you guys are finding the square of his hypotenuse, I'm going to find his car."

He went on foot because Stamaty's van had his car blocked. It took him less than fifteen minutes to find

the car that went with the keys—an economy sport coupe parked in conspicuous isolation on a residential cul-de-sac. He unlocked the passenger door and locked it again without opening it or touching the car. The interior looked empty except for the typical scattering of sunglasses, coins, odd scraps of paper, and beer cans. He hiked back to his car and called in the license number of the dead man's car.

When he rejoined the others, they were packing up. "So what's his blood type?" asked Kestrel, whose hawk's eye had caught the slip of paper in Auburn's hand.

"Lee Dana Brendel. His car is parked at the north end of Wilcox."

"Have they got anything on him downtown?"

"Bunch of speeding tickets. No arrests."

"Where'd he live?"

"In an apartment on Whatman."

"Family?"

"Not at that address, according to the city directory." They moved back along the path in single file toward their cars, leaving one patrolman to watch the body.

"I'm heading for his apartment now," said Auburn. "You coming, Stamaty?" It was understood that Kestrel would be going over the dead man's car for latent prints and other trace evidence.

"I better hang around till the mortuary squad gets here. I don't want to tie up these uniform guys any more."

"Okay. His place'll keep. I'll go around to those houses up on the hill first and see if anybody heard anything last night. When your

people come, give a couple of honks and I'll catch up with you, and we can run over to his place together."

"Together but separately," Stamaty agreed.

The tract of land that sloped down to end at the curving fence along Route 5 consisted of three residential lots, all facing away from the highway toward Roseland Court and each "improved" with a house in the three-hundred-thousand-dollar range. Auburn had to negotiate a steep path over rough terrain to reach Roseland Court without making a wide detour.

The first house he came to, nestled among tall old trees, was built in the Spanish style with white stucco walls, a red tile roof, and a central patio facing the street. It was nine thirty-five by his wristwatch when he rang the bell.

From the porch he could see through a window that the garage, which formed one side of the patio, was empty. He rang twice more and was about to give up when the door was opened a few inches on a security chain.

"Who is it?" asked a male voice from the dark entry hall.

"Police officer, sir," said Auburn, holding up his identification to the crack between door and jamb. "Making a routine investigation. Can I come in?"

"Investigation of what?"

"A man was found dead early this morning near the rear of your property."

A longish silence ensued. Auburn could smell coffee brewing in the house. "Who was he?"

"We don't have a positive I.D. yet.

Would you mind if I came in and asked you a few questions?"

"How do I know you're the police?"

Auburn held up his badge again, mounted in a leatherette case along with a photo identification card. "Here's my I.D."

"I can't see," said the voice. A pale, sinewy hand came through the crack, moved down until it touched the I.D., and went over it swiftly, the index and middle fingers twitching like the antennae of an insect. The hand disappeared, and the door closed and opened again.

"Come in."

Auburn stepped into the shadowy hall to confront a man in his thirties wearing wraparound sunglasses of an inky blackness. "Come on back to the kitchen."

Light flooding in through a south window lit up a big kitchen with a tile floor. On the table in the breakfast nook was a half-eaten meal of sausage and prefabricated waffles. The digital clock on the microwave oven said four twenty-two. "Like some coffee?"

"Sure. Thanks. I'll get it." Somewhere in the house a stereo was playing what Auburn took to be a modern opera—a flat, metallic soprano voice shrieking acidly to the accompaniment of orchestral dissonances. "Do you live here alone?"

"Part of the time. My sister stays here until we start getting on each other's nerves, and then she disappears for a while."

Auburn poured himself a cup of coffee and took a seat opposite his host, who had gone back to his breakfast. He took out a three-by-five-inch file card, laid it on the

kitchen table, and uncapped his pen.
"Your name, sir?"

"Conrad Neldrick. What's yours?"

"Cyrus Auburn. Detective Sergeant."

"How do you do?" Neldrick put down his fork and reached across the table to shake hands, with a grip like a horse trainer's. In the strong light Auburn noted two fresh shaving nicks on the side of his neck, of which Neldrick himself was probably unaware, and a blood blister on his left index finger. "What's this about a dead body?"

"A man was found dead along Route 5 this morning, just this side of the road."

"Whereabouts? On my property?"

"Not exactly." Auburn raised his arm to point but let it drop again. "Probably straight back from your neighbor's house here to the west. It's hard to be sure from down there."

"And you say you don't know who he was?"

"He's been tentatively identified as a Lee Brendel. Does that name mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing," said Neldrick. "What did he die of, do you know yet?"

"A head wound. It looks like a homicide."

"Could he have been hit by a car?"

"No, there's a high steel fence along the road there, and he was found lying on this side of it. Were you home last evening?"

"I'm always home. I work here."

"What sort of work do you do?"

"I'm a clinical psychologist. I do mostly consulting work by telephone."

"Did you hear anything unusual last evening or during the night?"

"No."

"Was your sister here yesterday?"

"No, Beth took off for the West Coast the day after Labor Day."

"Did you have any visitors yesterday? Business people, salesmen, deliveries—anything like that?"

"Not a soul."

Auburn got up. "Okay, Mr. Neldrick—or is it doctor?"

"Conrad."

"Thanks for the coffee. I put the cup in the sink."

"I heard you."

"I'll let myself out. Do you mind if I look around the back of your property for a couple of minutes?"

"Not at all." Auburn left him in the kitchen. The music swelled in volume as he was closing the front door.

Walking around the east side of the house to the back, he was surprised to find that it had an enormous lower level built into the side of the hill. A rock garden, ten or twelve feet wide, ran along behind the house, and beyond that the land fell sharply away to the level of the highway. The slope was covered by an almost impenetrable growth of trees and underbrush. Auburn could hear the traffic down on Route 5, but he couldn't see it.

He completed his circuit of Neldrick's house and grounds, reflecting that there must be plenty of money in headshrinking, even for a blind man. He went on to the next property.

The house here was in the greatest imaginable contrast to Neldrick's—a modernistic creation of

rough-sawn wooden beams stained alternately red and gray with sweeping decks on several levels daringly cantilevered out over nothing. The doorbell was answered by an elderly man with a face like a bulldog and the build of a professional wrestler. His head was shaved, and like many men below average height he held himself stiffly erect.

Auburn showed identification and announced his errand in general terms.

"Come on in here," said the man, gesturing with a hand in which he held a small tool. Auburn followed him into a circular, skylighted living room decorated with antique pottery and figurines. The blue-gray haze of cigarette smoke swirling in the air would have taken the edge off an axe. The man picked up a cigarette from an ashtray and put down his tool, which Auburn realized was a latchhook. A half-finished hooked rug with an abstract geometric design was stretched on a frame in the corner.

A stout woman with short-bobbed iron-gray hair and a pasty complexion devoid of makeup sat staring with dead-fish eyes at a television screen on which a row of gibbering idiots was being put through their paces by a talk-show host. On his second glance, Auburn saw that she was strapped into her chair with a broad band of canvas.

"My wife has a form of Alzheimer's disease," said the man. "She can't talk."

"I'm sorry to intrude on you," said Auburn, "but we're trying to find out what happened here behind your house last night."

"Sit down."

"Thanks, I won't be here that long. Does anybody live here besides you and your wife?"

The man fidgeted nervously with his cigarette and actually dropped it on the expensive-looking Oriental rug under his feet, but snatched it up before it could damage the fabric. "No, sir, just Lambie and I."

"And your name, sir?" He had already entered the address on a file card.

"Karl Roetherl." He spelled it.

The name was somehow familiar, but Auburn couldn't place it. "Your occupation?"

"Retired," was the abrupt reply, and Auburn left it at that.

"Early this morning, Mr. Roetherl, a man was found dead near the back of your property, just this side of the fence along Route 5. We think he was killed—murdered. Did you see or hear anything unusual around here last night?"

"Unusual? No. Who was he?"

"We think his name is Lee Brendel. Does that name mean anything to you?"

"No, sir." A series of animal cries drew him to his wife's side, where he spoke soothing words and adjusted the cushions behind her.

"Did you have anyone here at the house yesterday—repairmen, salesmen . . . ?"

"Nobody. A nurse comes in most days to help me with Lambie, but she wasn't here yesterday."

"Did you notice any activity at your neighbors' places yesterday or last night? Strange cars?"

Roetherl snuffed out his cigarette and lighted another before reply-

ing. "I don't know about strange. This guy over here—" he jerked a massive thumb in the direction of Neldrick's house "—has a steady stream of visitors. All women."

"Did you notice anybody there yesterday?"

"Oh yes. Woman in a red sports car came around four o'clock. Pulled right into his garage, as usual."

"You've seen her there before?"

"Many times."

"Did you see her leave?"

"Wasn't watching particularly. I noticed her coming because our kitchen window looks right down on his driveway."

"This wouldn't be Mr. Neldrick's sister, who I understand—"

"No, we know Beth."

"Did you happen to notice any cars or trucks parked out on the street yesterday?"

"No, sir."

Before leaving the Roetherls', Auburn walked out on an upper deck that overhung the slope to the rear. The roar of midmorning traffic on the highway was particularly evident here. Auburn almost thought he could smell exhaust fumes. But try as he might, he couldn't catch a glimpse of the road or the fence down below, and it was obvious that Brendel's body couldn't conceivably have fallen or been thrown from up here to the place where it was found.

The last house on Roseland Court was a sprawling mansion of dark red brick with high-pitched slate roofs and numerous chimneys. Auburn's ring was eventually answered by a woman who had palpably been asleep three minutes

earlier. Her eyelids were swollen, her hair looked like a rat's nest, and she had the befuddled air of someone who has just walked into a wall.

"Sorry to bother you this morning." He showed identification. "I'm making some routine inquiries about a homicide in the neighborhood."

"In *this* neighborhood?" She yawned and clutched her terrycloth bathrobe more tightly around her. "Come in."

As Auburn stepped into the entry hall, she touched a wall switch. Instantly a long corridor came alive with a blaze of multicolored lights that was like nothing he had ever seen outside of a penny arcade. Illuminated beer signs in seven colors of neon, some flashing off and on and others with moving parts, clustered so thickly along both sides of the passage from floor to ceiling that hardly a square inch of wall showed anywhere. The blaze of light was so sudden and so dazzling that Auburn couldn't suppress a start.

"Wild, isn't it?" said the woman.

"Makes me thirsty just looking at them." It seemed the sort of thing he was expected to say, though as a matter of fact beer gave him violent headaches. "You've got some money tied up there."

"Oh, beer signs are cheap. It's the animated displays and antique toys that break you up." She padded ahead of him in her furry mules to a sunny morning room where half a dozen miniature merry-go-rounds were set out on tables and stands. One was a miracle of gold filigree work. Another had been built along the lines of a Gothic cathedral and

had statues of the twelve apostles instead of horses.

"We're doing a book on elektrokitsch," she explained through another colossal yawn.

"A book on which?"

"Elektrokitsch. You know what kitsch is, right? Tacky, tasteless junk that passes for high art with the working classes? Extruded plastic stuff, gimcrack souvenirs, paintings on black velvet. That kind of trash. Well, we collect elektrokitsch. Statues of saints with haloes that light up. Statues of Elvis that wiggle their pelvis. Here, look at this."

She turned on one of the merry-go-rounds, which sprang into life with flashing multicolored lights and a raucous carnival tune produced by a miniature band organ.

Auburn smiled and nodded. He was relieved when his pulling out a blank file card prompted her to shut the thing off.

"May I ask your name?"

"Monica Rayster," she said, adding, "Mrs. John D.," as if that should mean something to him. It didn't.

"Were you home all day yesterday?"

"Yes. All day and all night. My husband's in South America buying wood."

"Did you have any visitors here at the house yesterday or last evening?"

"No." She was struggling desperately to wake up. "Did I hear you say somebody was killed?"

"A body was found this morning down by Route 5."

"Oh, I'm not surprised. You wouldn't believe what goes on down there

at night. Sometimes we can hear them yelling at three o'clock in the morning. Mostly kids. And they love to throw their beer cans up in our woods."

"Did you hear anything last night?"

"Not that I can remember."

"Did you notice anything happening in the neighborhood last evening—unusual activity at the neighbors', strange cars . . ."

"Oh no. The Roetherls go to bed at eight o'clock, and there's never any traffic on the road out there." She was yawning so intensely and repeatedly that Auburn had to struggle to keep from doing it, too.

On his way out he caught glimpses of two other rooms full of elektrokitsch. As he retraced his steps along Roseland Court, he pondered the irony that a woman who expressed such contempt for the taste of the working class—to which Auburn was proud to belong—should fill her house with the very rubbish she affected to despise.

He arrived back at his car just as the mortuary crew—private contractors looking more than ever this morning like a couple of hoodlums—drove away with the body in an unmarked, low-slung, silver-gray hearse that belonged in a museum.

Stamaty was rolling up pieces of yellow plastic tape and stuffing them in his pockets. "Get anything up there?"

"I don't think so." He filled Stamaty in on the residents of Roseland Court.

"Karl Roetherl? How old?"

"Maybe sixty-five."

Stamaty meditated. "Couldn't be

the same guy. A Karl Roetherl built both of the steel bridges downtown and half the buildings, including the county courthouse and Pierce Hall. But that was back in the twenties and thirties. This guy could be his son, maybe grandson."

"Let's head for Brendel's place." Auburn gave him the number on Whatman, and they drove there, together but separately.

Kestrel had taken Brendel's car keys, but Stamaty had the rest of the ring. They knocked twice before entering the apartment, which was on the ground floor and had its own entrance off a closed court.

It was clean and neat for a bachelor apartment. The refrigerator was well stocked with premium beer. One of the two bedrooms had been converted into an electronics lab, with an oscilloscope, soldering irons, racks of tools, and trays of parts. A locked closet, whose key was on the ring, was crammed with VCR's, midget TV's, camcorders, CD players, parts, and chests of silverware—obviously a cache of stolen property. "Another job for Kestrel," said Auburn, locking the closet again.

Stamaty was rooting through Brendel's papers and personal articles. He came up with a stack of shiny metallic stickers bearing the legend "For Service Call 275-4224."

In the other bedroom Auburn found a phone with an answering machine. "Same phone number as on the stickers," he said.

He pressed a button on the machine. A voice, presumably the dead man's, announced, "Hot Shot Fundamentals"—Stamaty heard it

as "One Shot from the Middle"—"Please leave your name and number after the tone."

Auburn pressed another button to play back messages. The first caller was a woman who didn't identify herself. All she said was, "Lee, I'll be at Dad's all evening if you want to come over." The only other message wasn't so cordial. "Hey, Lee, this's Hick," snarled a harsh, surly male voice. "If you're lost again, buddy, you better get found quick, or you ain't gonna have no job. I mean it, now."

Auburn went back to the workshop and picked up a bundle of discount coupons from Hick's Red Carpet Transmission.

"Are they making them electronic now?" he wondered out loud.

Stamaty grunted. "Let's go find the building manager."

The woman who answered the door marked "Office" froze up when Auburn showed his I.D. She seemed inclined to feign feeble-mindedness until he explained why they were there.

She said Brendel had lived in the building about a year and a half, was prompt with his rent, and didn't give wild parties or feud with other tenants. She didn't know of any relatives and couldn't identify any regular visitors. She thought he sometimes worked on TV's or stereos in his spare time but didn't feel he was running a business from the apartment.

It took all of Stamaty's very considerable finesse and diplomacy to persuade her to accompany him to the county morgue to identify the body. Before they left, Auburn asked

her for directions to the garage Brendel had used.

"He didn't have a car," she said. "Just a motorcycle. It's around in the back with a tarp over it."

That explained the last key on Brendel's ring, but raised the question where he'd kept the sports car. "Are you sure he didn't park a car on the street?"

"That I couldn't say, but he woke me up every morning at six thirty starting his motorcycle to go to work."

After she and Stamaty left, Auburn had a look at the motorcycle and then called headquarters from a pay phone. First he reported the closet full of stolen property in Brendel's apartment. The man on the desk in Robbery promised they'd wait until Auburn returned to headquarters with the keys before going to the apartment. Then he requested background checks on Neldrick, the Roetherls, and the Raysters, including finding out if any of them had recently reported thefts to the police. Finally he asked to be connected with Kestrel in the lab.

"Did you find anything in his car?" he asked.

"Not yet. I got some latent prints and the usual bags of dirt. Dollinger just drove it in to the Sixth Street garage."

"Did you notice the garage door opener on the passenger side visor?"

"Robina model AA. I've got the serial number here if you want it."

"You would. What would it be if it wasn't a garage door opener?"

In the ensuing silence Auburn could almost see Kestrel's scowl of impatience through the telephone

wire. "Why wouldn't it be a garage door opener?"

"Because he didn't have a garage. Not at his apartment, anyway."

"Well, it's a remote switch for something. I opened it to check for drugs and test the batteries. They're good, and it's got all the original circuitry."

Auburn decided to let word of Brendel's hoard of stolen property reach Kestrel through Robbery. "I'll get back to you later."

Hick's Red Carpet Transmission was in a part of town where prudent people didn't go after dark and nervous people didn't go at all. There were cars on hoists in all six bays, but only two or three mechanics were at work. A broad "carpet" of red paint led from the parking area to the office door.

At Auburn's entry a man stood up behind a massive steel desk littered with work orders, car keys, and Styrofoam cups. "What can I help you with today, sir?" Auburn recognized the voice from the answering machine recording. Hick was a big man with deep-set eyes and a waxed mustache.

His mercenary exuberance evaporated as soon as Auburn showed identification. "Just a routine investigation. Does Lee Brendel work here?"

"He does when he ain't chucking beer and chasing women." He hitched up his trousers belt and left his thumbs inside. "You know where he's at?"

"How long has he worked here?"

"About three years. He's my best transmission builder when he shows up. Is he in jail?"

"No, sir. He was found dead along Route 5 this morning."

Hick sat down again and recited the names of one or two biblical figures with explosive fervor. "He get hit by a car, or what?"

"We think it's a homicide. Blunt injury to the head. Would you know offhand of anybody who might have wanted him out of the way?"

"No. No, I sure wouldn't. He got along good with everybody here. My guys' private life I don't mess with." The phone rang and he made an appointment for a transmission tuneup the first of the following week.

"What can you tell me about a TV repair service Brendel ran on his own?"

"He had some kind of a thing going, Hot Rod Enterprises, something like that. Lee was handy. He could set up a torque converter in the dark. I ain't so sure about TV, though. I thought it was custom cars."

"What kind of car did he drive?"

"Lee was mostly a biker. Sometimes he showed up in different cars, but most generally it was a 'cycle. You can lose five or six minutes of a lunch hour just waiting to pull a car out in that traffic at noon. He used to shoot out of here on his bike every noon and ride along the lane markers between the cars. You sure he didn't get hit?"

"We're sure. Did he have any special friends here at the shop?"

"Not special. Like I said, he got along good with all the guys."

"You mentioned women. Would you know any by name?"

Hick stood up again, put his

thumbs back inside his belt, and shook his head. "Their name," he said with a hoarse chuckle, "was legion."

Although there was no departmental regulation on the subject, officers working on a homicide were encouraged to attend the autopsy whenever possible. Unfortunately it usually wasn't possible without delaying critical steps in the investigation. At two o'clock Auburn reported to the county morgue to witness the autopsy on Lee Brendel, whose body had been formally identified by his apartment manager.

Dr. Valentine, the forensic pathologist, was just taking photographs of the head wound with the help of his assistant, an ancient, wizened man in a rubber apron with tattoos all over both arms. Auburn stood outside a chest-high Plexiglas partition that enclosed the autopsy table. Next to him Stamaty, the only other observer, was busy shuffling papers and making notes. He told Stamaty about his visit to Hick's transmission shop.

On the strength of several years' experience as a beat cop in another city, Stamaty fancied himself a pretty good detective. "I would have talked to all the guys in that shop," he said. "You can bet they know more about Brendel than his boss does. They could probably put a name to that woman on the answering machine, too. And one of them probably helped him steal all that stuff we found in his closet."

"If he did, he isn't going to tell me about it. But I see Brendel working as a lone wolf."

"Somebody got close enough to him last night to give him a terminal headache," objected Stamaty.

"But why in that particular place? There's got to be a reason why he ended up on that path, ten miles from his apartment and twelve or thirteen from where he worked."

"Maybe the girl lives around there."

"Or anyway her dad. Let's watch the show."

After an hour and a half of meticulous examination, Dr. Valentine concluded that death was due to laceration and hemorrhage of the brain in an otherwise healthy adult male.

Auburn was back at his desk updating his memoirs when, around four, background checks came in on the residents of Roseland Court. Conrad Neldrick, Ph.D., was a licensed clinical psychologist. Blind from birth, he had an IQ that was off the charts, spoke four languages, and carried on an international practice by telephone. His sister Beth, widowed for years, traveled widely as the spirit moved her.

Karl Roetherl was a retired architect, grandson of the Karl Roetherl who had designed and built half the big buildings in town. He and his wife had also traveled extensively until she fell victim to senile dementia. Their record was clean except that, years ago, Roetherl had been held for some weeks in Canada as a suspect in the death of a cousin, also named Karl Roetherl. The death had eventually been ruled a hunting accident.

John D. Rayster's firm supplied specialty hardwoods to shipbuilders, furniture manufacturers, and cab-

inetmakers. He and his wife Martha were patrons of the arts and champions of oddball causes, but had no criminal records or associations. The last report of a break-in on Roseland Court had been six years ago.

Preliminary laboratory reports showed no drugs or alcohol in Brendel's blood. So far, none of the property in his closet had been traced to its rightful owners. His car was still being studied. Kestrel had found Brendel's own prints in it and a few partials that hadn't been identified yet and probably never would be. There were no bloodstains in or on the car. It contained no significant trace evidence and nothing that didn't belong in it.

Except the garage door opener. Kestrel had turned it over to an electronics technician, who reported that it emitted a shortwave signal with an effective range of about forty meters. The unit was adjustable, with sixty-four possible frequency settings. It had been manufactured and marketed as a remote controller for an electric garage door opener, but it could just as well be used to start a pump or detonate a bomb.

The end of his shift was approaching and he was getting hungry, but Auburn sought out Lieutenant Savage for a conference on the Brendel murder. Savage shoved some folders aside and made room on his desk for the reports Auburn had collected. "Why isn't this just robbery with violence?" he asked.

"I think it's *burglary* with violence," said Auburn, "and I think Brendel himself was the one who did the burgling."

"What happened to his wallet?"

"Maybe he didn't have one. Maybe somebody lifted it after he was dead. According to the neighbors that's a pretty wild spot after dark."

"In Harmony Heights?"

"You'd have to see the place. If you're walking north along Route 5, the sidewalk ends at the viaduct. From there you can either make an eight or ten block detour to pick up Route 5 again north of Slade, or you can duck through some hedges and follow the highway between a chain-link fence and a steep hill full of trees and bushes. Or I guess if you were completely wasted you might try walking in the street."

"Which you're pretty sure Brendel didn't do?"

"Not unless whatever hit him flipped him over an eight foot fence without damaging anything except his right temple. Dr. Valentine thinks he was hit with a hammer."

"Which you think happened while he was committing a burglary in the neighborhood?"

"Well, look at the facts. He had a cache of stolen property locked in a closet—"

"Probably stolen. Which he could have been fencing for someone else."

"Okay. For my money this guy was a professional burglar. In his car is a remote control for a garage door opener. Only he hasn't got a garage."

"And you think his M.O. was to gain entry to houses by opening their garage doors with this thing?"

"Why not? He had a whole workshop full of electronic equipment. That remote controller is adjustable."

"But, Cy, you can't put up a garage door without waking up the whole house. Not with an electric motor. Ours shakes every dish in the china cupboard."

"Maybe he only hit houses he thought were vacant."

"What about the neighbors? Attached garages usually face the street. When a door goes up automatically, a light comes on inside."

"Okay, forget the garage door opener. You can't get away from the fact that he was almost certainly a professional burglar and that he was killed in the middle of the night in a place where he had no legitimate business."

"None that you know of. Maybe he went out there to fix somebody's TV—"

"With two screwdrivers in his pocket?"

"—took a shortcut through the woods, ran into some muggers—"

"—who killed him with a hammer."

Savage fell into a thoughtful silence. "Well, you've got to play your own hunches. But I think you'll find the garage door opener is just what it appears to be. This death will be on the six o'clock news, and I'd bet anything we'll hear from somebody who rented Brendel garage space, or a girlfriend that let him park in hers."

"Could be. Meanwhile I think I'll get that unit back from Kestrel and take it up there. Drive around the neighborhood, hit the button a few times, see if any garage doors go up. Or any bombs go off."

"Are you trying to make me nervous?" Savage squinted at him and

chewed his cheek. "Before you push that button, get with Kestrel and make sure they didn't find any explosives at Brendel's place. That's an order."

He reached for his jacket. "A detective sergeant accidentally setting off a bomb in somebody's living room in Harmony Heights," said Savage, "would be, as my daughter would put it, majorly uncool."

One of the hassles of working overtime into the dogwatch was that businesses closed, witnesses and suspects went out on the town, and other members of the force—including one's own superior officer—knocked off and went home to catch the six o'clock news. But Auburn wasn't surprised to find Kestrel still in his office on the top floor of headquarters at a few minutes past five.

Kestrel's reply to his query about explosives was a categorical negative. "I want you to look at something, though," he said, leading Auburn into a small lab that was as clean and orderly as an operating room. On the workbench lay four or five tagged articles, including the garage door controller from Brendel's car. Kestrel picked up two identical black metal boxes a little larger than the controller.

"These came from Brendel's shop," he said. "Each of them contains a remote-controlled solenoid. If you hook these two wires up to a hundred-and-ten-volt power source and beam a radio signal at this thing, the solenoid will jerk this rod inward with a force of about ten kilograms."

"A signal from that garage door controller?"

"Not as it was set when we found

it. But it could be reset to the right frequency for either one of these. Do you want a demonstration?"

Auburn looked at his watch. "I haven't time right now. Just tell me what those things are for."

"I've already told you. They're remote-controlled solenoids." Kestrel was visibly piqued that Auburn didn't care to watch him playing wizard. "They can do anything that requires a pull of ten kilos. They were not mass-produced. Brendel made them. What he made them for isn't deducible from the available data."

A neat formula, thought Auburn, for admitting ignorance without admitting ignorance. He consulted a file card and, from Kestrel's phone, dialed a number. A recorded message told him that Hick's Red Carpet Transmission was closed until seven next morning. Mentally buffeting himself about the head and face for not calling earlier, he went back to headquarters.

While he ate a solitary dinner in the canteen, he pored over the Brendel file. Then he headed for the downtown branch of the public library, which was open until ten o'clock on weeknights.

He was back in his office before seven P.M. Auburn seldom wore his service revolver as he went about his daily chores, but tonight he spent time putting it in order before strapping it on. When he left headquarters for Roseland Court, he had the garage door controller in his pocket.

He cruised slowly past each of the houses he had visited that morning, hitting the button on the remote opposite each garage. Nothing happened. He parked opposite

the Raysters' and went up to the door. It was now nearly dark and lights showed in several windows.

Monica Rayster came to the door in a hot pink sweatsuit with a matching elastic band around her head. Somewhere in the house a tape player or VCR was pounding out an aerobic dance routine. "Oh, it's the policeman again!"

"Just a few more questions, Mrs. Rayster. Maybe I should've phoned first."

"No problem. Come in." She ushered him into the room with the merry-go-rounds, went away to turn off the tape, and came back with a towel.

"This won't take long," said Auburn. "I wonder, did you or your husband have any transmission work done on your cars recently?"

She looked stunned. "Our cars? No. Why?"

"Did you have any work done on your garage door opener?"

Her surprise increased. "No. John would have fixed that himself. He installed it in the first place."

"I imagine you're probably into doing some electrical work yourself, aren't you?" He glanced at the examples of "elektrokitsch" displayed in the room.

"Oh, not really. I know not to connect the black wire to the white wire, but John does all the repairs and restorations on the mechanisms. Why do you ask?"

"One more question. Are any of the pieces in your collection operated by remote control?"

She was now completely bewildered. "What do you mean by remote control?"

"Radio controlled. Like these little cars the kids have, with the—"

"Oh no. The only toys we collect are antiques, from before the days of radio. How does all this tie in with that man getting killed? Or does it?" She gave him a bemused smile, as if she thought he had just dreamed up some idiotic questions so as to have an excuse for coming back for a second interview.

"Apparently it doesn't," he said, matching her smile as he rose to leave.

Things hadn't changed much at the Roetherls'. The fog of cigarette smoke was perhaps a few degrees denser and more acrid, and a tray with soiled dishes showed that Mrs. Roetherl had lately had her dinner. But the television still babbled unheeded, and Roetherl was still puttering over his hooked rug. Auburn asked him if he'd had any work done on his garage door recently.

"The garage door?" Roetherl inhaled smoke deeply and expelled it in billows from his nostrils. "You mean repairs?"

"Yes. In particular, on the electric door opener. If you have one."

"I have one, and it works fine. I just greased the chain in August. What's your point?"

"Do you do your own automotive repairs, too?"

"Some of them. We don't use the car much now. Lambie gets carsick, and I don't dare leave her alone."

"What about transmission work?"

"I wouldn't touch that. But I've never had any transmission trouble with this car."

"Does Mrs. Roetherl—I mean—can she walk?"

Roetherl grimaced through another cloud of smoke. "The doctor says the muscles are okay but she just can't get it together up here." He pounded his temple with his forefinger, spilling ashes. "I carry her down those stairs every morning and carry her up every night. I asked the doctor about a chair lift, and he said wait a while. You know what that means." He selected a length of colored yarn and fitted it into his latchhook. "We had some good times, though, Lambie and I. Went around the world three times."

"I understand you've been retired for quite a number of years."

"More than twenty-five. I inherited my grandfather's engineering business but unfortunately not his genius as an architect. I never knew a pilaster from an architrave. That's why I sold out while I was ahead."

"Earlier today you said you saw a car entering the garage next door sometime yesterday afternoon."

"That's right," nodded Roetherl, clearly relieved that the spotlight was off his own affairs. "Around four. A red Alfa Romeo."

"And you'd seen that same car there before?"

"Often."

"Did you happen to notice whether the garage door went up automatically?"

"No. I can't see the door from the kitchen window."

"And you didn't see it leave later?"

"For all I know, she's still there."

Auburn took his leave while Roetherl was shifting his wife into a more comfortable position.

Neldrick's house was dark except for a dim glow in the entry hall. But

the blind man answered Auburn's ring at once and on hearing his voice released the chain and let him in. He wasn't wearing his dark glasses this evening. Touching chairs and door frames lightly as he went and putting on one or two lights for Auburn's benefit, he led the way into a large, comfortable living room.

"You'll have to excuse any dust in here," said Neldrick, sinking into an overstuffed chair. "When Beth isn't around, the cleaning lady gets a little slack."

"Does your cleaning lady come every day?"

"No, only Mondays and Fridays." It was uncanny how the blind man's eyes, guided by Auburn's voice, seemed almost to be meeting his with their glassy stare. "She's due again tomorrow."

Auburn sat down opposite Neldrick and slowly and silently drew his revolver. "You said this morning that you hadn't had any visitors yesterday. Do you still hold to that?"

"Certainly."

"What if I told you somebody saw a small red sports car pull into your garage yesterday afternoon around four o'clock?" The revolver was now pointed straight between Neldrick's idly roving eyes. Auburn's heart was hammering in his throat; he could feel sweat trickling down his sides.

A shadow of annoyance passed over Neldrick's face but nothing more. "A client did visit me yesterday afternoon, by appointment," he conceded.

"You mean a patient?" Auburn's voice sounded hollow and distant to his own ears.

"Psychologists don't use that word, since we're not physicians. The real doctors don't like it. But, yes, it was a professional visit. The visitor's identity, of course, is privileged information."

Auburn wrapped his left hand around his right wrist to steady it and began slowly squeezing the trigger of the revolver.

"I'm not asking for a name," he said, keeping his voice level with an effort. "I just wonder why you denied having had a visitor yesterday when I asked about it before."

Neldrick was leaning back and indulging in a sour grin as the firing pin snapped forward. "Because," he said, "the local zoning regulations prohibit me from seeing clients in my home. There's a lighter on the shelf behind you."

"I'm sorry?"

"I thought you were having trouble lighting a cigarette. You sound as if you needed one."

Auburn's empty revolver was back in its holster. "I'll be okay. I've just got a touch of indigestion." Which was true enough.

He paused in Neldrick's dark driveway to reload his weapon before returning to the Roetherls'. On impulse he walked down their driveway to the garage and tried lifting the overhead door on the right. It rolled up easily on its tracks to reveal Karl Roetherl doing something inside with a flashlight and screwdriver.

"What's the idea?" sputtered Roetherl with canine ferocity. "You just about knocked me off this step-ladder. You're on private property."

"Settle down, Mr. Roetherl," said

Auburn, staying at the open end of the garage. "Tell me about the garage door."

"There's nothing to tell."

"I think there is. When did you have it worked on?"

"I don't know. Several weeks ago. In August."

"Back when you told me you greased it?"

"Yes. He greased it."

"Who?"

"The man who came to work on it." He got down off the ladder and lit a cigarette. "The controller wouldn't work. I replaced the battery, but that didn't help. Inside the battery compartment there was a sticker with a phone number for service. I called, and they sent a man out."

"And did he fix it?"

"Yes. He also told me the safety code now requires some kind of automatic release, and he put one on for me."

"That little black box you were just looking at?" Roetherl smoked furiously, peering into the twilight behind Auburn. "When was the next time you saw him?"

Getting no answer, Auburn supplied one himself. "Last night you heard a noise here in the garage. You came down and found that the man who worked on the door in August had come back. That black box he put on enabled him to disconnect the door from the opener mechanism by using a remote control unit from outside. He was getting ready to cover his tracks by taking the box off again when you surprised him and hit him with—what? A golf club? A hammer?"

Roetherl ground out his cigarette

on the garage floor with the toe of his shoe. "Let's go inside," he said. "I can't hear Lambie from here."

"You go on in," said Auburn. "I'll put the door back down and come around to the porch. Better lock the door to the basement until you get this door fixed."

Before Auburn had time to ring at the front door, Roetherl opened it for him and led him once again into the venomous atmosphere of the living room. Mrs. Roetherl seemed to be dozing.

"Why didn't you admit a while ago that you'd had transmission work done on your car?"

"Because I thought you were getting around to telling me this fellow had been run down by my car. I knew that wasn't true, but I wanted to avoid—" After stopping to light another cigarette he picked up his narrative on a different tack. "Sometimes I let my wife's nurse, Mrs. DePaul, use my car. Last summer I had her take it in for some transmission work."

"And that was when Brendel pulled a wire loose in the remote unit for your garage door opener and put in a label inviting you to call a number to get it fixed—*his* number."

Roetherl, smoking in silence, shrugged and nodded.

"So what did you hit him with?"

"A crowbar he swung at me. It's in the Raysters' fishpond along with some other tools he had. Aren't you supposed to read me my rights?"

"I wasn't planning to arrest you for killing Brendel. At the very worst it was manslaughter. But I do have

to read you your rights about another matter. I think I know why you went to the trouble of carrying Brendel's body all the way down to the road in the dark last night instead of calling the police and telling them what had happened."

As Auburn recited the Miranda formula, the bravado glare died out of Roetherl's eyes, to be replaced by a dark gleam of fear.

"I read over some old newspaper accounts of your trouble in Canada back in the fifties," said Auburn. "You were accused of shooting your cousin and making it look like a hunting accident."

"And I was fully exonerated," said Roetherl. "It *was* an accident."

"Your cousin was a Marine on leave. You had just inherited your grandfather's business—all of it. You and your cousin were both named Karl after your grandfather. You had the same name, the same build, almost the same face—"

"That's ancient history."

"But *you*, sir, were the Marine on leave, weren't you? The man who died was the architect, the successor to your grandfather's business and fortune. After shooting him in the head, a day and a half away from civilization, you exchanged clothes and personal effects with him." Roetherl was shaking his head and indeed the whole upper half of his squat body in a frenzy of denial.

"You and your cousin were the only surviving representatives of your family. After your acquittal you traveled outside the country for years before you could safely return and step into the other Karl Roetherl's shoes."

"That's the most fantastic, idiotic—"

"Six years ago you had a break-in here and failed to report it. One of your neighbors did. When the police came to investigate, you claimed you'd broken the window yourself and refused to let them in. Why? For the same reason you didn't call the police last night and tell them you'd surprised an intruder and hit him a little too hard—because you couldn't risk having them go over the place and find the fingerprints of a man who's supposed to have died forty years ago."

Roetherl collapsed into a chair. "I've dreaded this moment every waking hour of my life for all those forty years. All right, yes, I changed places with my cousin. What are you going to do about it now? There isn't much left of the money. There isn't much left of me."

An overwhelming wave of pity threatened to wipe away Auburn's objectivity. "There's no statute of limitations on first-degree murder," he forced himself to say.

"I tell you I was acquitted," Roetherl snarled, with something like a return of his former pugnacity. "You can't try a man twice for the same crime."

"That won't work, sir. You weren't acquitted because you never came to trial. You were exonerated of a charge that you had murdered Karl Roetherl the Marine. If your prints match his in military records, you can be tried for the murder of the

man you've been claiming to be. The case against Karl Roetherl the millionaire architect fell apart because there was no apparent motive. But Karl Roetherl the disinherited grandson, the instructor in hand-to-hand combat—"

Roetherl ran a jerky hand over his shaven scalp. "I'll have to make some arrangements about Lambie," he said. "And it's time for her medicine."

They went to the kitchen, where Roetherl emptied a bottle of clear liquid into a drinking glass and added grape juice. In the nick of time Auburn woke up to the fact that Roetherl was on the point of giving his wife a lethal overdose. Preferring not to scuffle with an ex-Marine who had carried the hundred eighty-eight pound Brendel a quarter of a mile over rough ground in the dark, he drew his weapon.

He nearly had to put a bullet through Roetherl to stop him. Keeping the big man covered, he called headquarters on the kitchen phone. Funny how steady his hand was now, holding a loaded revolver, when his charade with an empty one to verify Neldrick's blindness had turned him into a shivering wreck.

At least he had recovered his self-command in time to prevent Roetherl from committing deliberate murder right under his nose. That, as the lieutenant's daughter might express it, would have been majorly uncool.

The Honeymoon Kill

Bill Knox

David Bannerman knew it as a sad, cynical truth. When you're feeling happy, at the crest of a wave, hold on tight—there's often a deep trough of misery lurking on the other side. He heard a sigh come from Helen Bannerman, his sister and business partner, and knew she felt the same.

Andrew Adams, the man seated opposite them, was in his fifties, well-dressed and prosperous, a director in a rock-solid Scottish stock-broking firm. He had arrived without an appointment at the Banner Agency, the small private investigation and security consultancy the Bannermans operated from the top floor of an old Georgian building in the heart of Edinburgh.

But Adams had a handwritten introduction from the banker who nursed the Bannermans' joint overdraft through moments of crisis. So they'd listened, almost able to feel his despair.

Two weeks earlier the world had been bright for Andrew Adams. He and his wife had been in New York, where his only son was being married. Now they'd been told their son was dead, buried under an avalanche in Switzerland.

"Except you don't believe it," said Bannerman softly. "So you want us to find the truth."

"Win or lose," agreed his visitor tightly. "Will you try?"

David Bannerman glanced at his sister. She gave a fractional nod, which made it unanimous.

"We'll try," said David. He walked to the window and looked over the grey slate rooftops of the Scottish capital towards the medieval bulk of Edinburgh Castle.

"Let's go over the basics again. Your son's name is Mark, he's a newly qualified lawyer, his bride's name is Susan, she's an American citizen from—"

"From New York," nodded Andrew Adams. "They met when Mark was in the States on a graduate exchange scheme. Susan is a nurse."

They'd met at a university party and been engaged within a month. The wedding was in New York; then Mark Adams had brought his bride back to Europe, to honeymoon in Switzerland. They had collected a Volvo in Edinburgh and had driven across Europe to the Bernese Alpine resort village of Grindelwald, close under the legendary Eiger mountain. Telephone calls to both sets of parents had said everything was fine. But it was now forty-eight hours since Mark had vanished. The last thing known was that he'd gone walking near the mountain while his bride had a hair appointment at the village beauty salon.

It was early spring; there'd been late snowfalls and risks of ava-

lanches. The young lawyer had simply disappeared without a trace.

"I should be there," said Andrew Adams in a weary voice. "But there is my wife to consider—"

Mark Adams' mother had a weak heart and had collapsed on hearing her son was missing. She was in hospital, too ill to be moved. The other set of parents, now in regular telephone touch from New York, were getting ready to fly over to be with their daughter.

"But you say Susan wants everyone to wait until she has more news," frowned Helen, puzzled.

"That's what she says," Andrew Adams nodded. "And all we can get from the police is that this was just another tourist accident." His mouth tightened. "I know what that means. They'll leave things until summer; they'll look for a body when the snow melts."

"There's probably not a lot we can do," warned David.

"Maybe not, but forget the cost." The stockbroker clenched his fists. "On the phone Susan sounds near collapse. But something's wrong. She's no fool. It's as if she's holding something back. Something she's frightened to tell me."

"Give me a moment," said Helen Bannerman. "I'll be right back."

By the time she returned, her brother had gathered more details and the stockbroker had produced a wedding day photograph of the couple. Mark Adams was a dark-haired man in his twenties with a plump, cheerful face. His bride Susan was about the same age, slim and attractive, with blonde, shoulder-length hair.

Andrew Adams left. Once he'd gone, the Bannermans exchanged a wry glance. "Better see when we can get a flight," suggested David.

"I already did," said Helen mildly. "I spoke to that redhead you know at the airport."

"And?" said her brother warily.

"We're booked on the next Swiss-air flight, at one A.M." She grinned. "For you, says your redhead, anything."

The night flight to Basel touched down at four A.M., and a chauffeur-driven BMW was waiting for them. Then they were off on the eighty mile drive to Grindelwald, most of it over snow-covered roads. Along the way Helen snatched some sleep, her head on Bannerman's shoulder, and he looked down at his sister with the kind of smile he wouldn't have let her see if she'd been awake. They were close, they always had been—they just didn't like admitting it to anyone.

David Bannerman was exactly thirty years of age, Helen was two years younger, and an outsider wouldn't have taken them for brother and sister. David was tall and whipcord thin with blue eyes, broad cheekbones, and light brown hair. Helen was barely medium height with brown eyes and dark hair. Attractive rather than goodlooking, verging on plump, she often did the real thinking between them.

They'd inherited the Banner Agency from their father, a retired Edinburgh police inspector, who had signed it over to them when he and his wife retired to Florida. Bannerman Senior had built up a rep-

utation for handling the odd and unusual, something that had continued.

This time? David shook his head. They'd find out soon enough.

They reached Grindelwald in the grey light of dawn, the last of the journey over a narrow, snow-covered mountain road where the tire chains bit with a soft, steady rattle. Their destination, a blend of old-style chalets and modern concrete hotels, was a village huddled spectacularly close under the famed north face of the Eiger, six thousand feet of nearly vertical Alpine rock climbed by the brave in midsummer but accepted as almost unapproachable during most of winter.

Susan Adams was waiting in her bridal suite—a two-room section of a quiet guesthouse. Her fair hair tied back with a thin leather thong, she wore tailored grey trousers and a loose blue sweater and was trying hard to keep control. She ordered breakfast for them and made them eat while she talked in a quick, tight, level voice.

"The police have searched almost nonstop. They brought in dogs, even a helicopter," she told them. "They think Mark must have ignored the warnings about wandering off the regular paths. They keep talking about crevasses and rockfalls." She shook her head. "We'd agreed to split up for the morning, and Mark planned to explore some of the trails outside the village. I had my hair done and did some souvenir shopping—then we'd arranged to meet for lunch. He—well, he didn't show."

There was a knock at the door, and Susan Adams went to open it. She returned with a round-faced man who wore a brown wool suit and had close-cropped grey hair.

"This is John Gelling," she said. "He has helped me a lot."

"There hasn't been much anyone could do," said Gelling gravely. His voice had a faint, hard-to-identify accent. "But I'm staying in the guesthouse, so I did what I could."

"What do you think happened?" asked Helen bluntly.

"Much the same as everyone else does." Gelling spread his hands sadly. "I'm sorry, but I think the best thing you can do is persuade Susan to go back to Britain. No one can do anything more here."

"I can't. I won't." Susan Adams gave a determined shake of her head.

Gelling sighed, made a slight grimace towards the Bannermans, then quietly left the room. Once he had gone, David Bannerman gave a small shrug.

"He could be right, Susan."

"John Gelling means well, and he was out with the search parties." Her voice was a whisper. "But I'm not leaving. I know Mark is alive—he must be. There's—" she stopped short and moistened her lips.

"Go on, Susan. There's what?" David looked at her for a moment, then his voice hardened. "You know why we're here. You know how Mark's father feels, what this has done to his mother, what it must be doing to your own family." He ignored his sister's gathering frown. "We were sent to help you. Our kind of help doesn't mean holding

your hand and making soothing noises."

"I—" She swallowed.

"Be real." Bannerman saw her in decision and took a gamble. "What are you holding back? What is it the police don't know?"

Susan gave a sob and buried her head in her hands.

"Ease back, Dave," ordered Helen grimly. She laid a hand on the younger woman's arm. "Susan, see sense. Use us."

Reluctantly Susan raised her head. There were new tears in her eyes.

"I had a phone call," she said slowly. "And I think Mark might still be alive."

"You'd better tell us it all," said David gently.

She was silent again, then nodded.

Everything had gone smoothly at first for the honeymoon couple. The journey to Switzerland had been without problems. Then, the third evening of their stay at Grindelwald, Mark Adams had left the guesthouse to explore for a couple of hours on his own while Susan wrote some postcards.

"When he came back, Mark did nothing but talk about a man he'd met in a bar—a man who offered him a chance to clear all our honeymoon expenses."

"How?" asked Helen.

"Mark didn't know the details. Just that it involved smuggling watches in a way that he reckoned would be easy enough—and that we'd be fools to refuse. He—Mark—had been told not to say anything to me about it."

"Be glad he told you," said David, glancing at his sister. It seemed they'd found even more trouble than they'd expected. "Did the man in the bar have a name?"

"Mark didn't tell me. Then—well, we quarrelled about it. Yes, we could use the money—neither of us is exactly loaded, we've needed everything we had to set up a home." She bit her lip. "Even so, I told him he was crazy, it was too risky, that I didn't want to know."

Nothing more had happened until Mark had vanished. The telephone call had come to the guesthouse that afternoon.

"It was a man's voice, a stranger's voice. He said he had a message for Lollipop." Susan's voice almost broke. "Only Mark calls me that—it's special between us. No one else could know it. Do you understand?"

Helen nodded. "What else did he say?"

"That I had to keep my mouth shut about what they'd wanted Mark to do. If I did, maybe things could get better. Then whoever he was hung up."

Faced with a gnawing blend of doubt and fear in a country where she knew no one, the young American bride had until then been too concerned about her husband's disappearance to even consider the smuggling offer as a link. When she did, the new situation brought possible hope—and with that hope came new fears, yet no further call to Lollipop.

"But suppose there's some kind of miracle and Mark does turn up," she said with a remnant of stubborn defiance. "And suppose I'd al-

ready told the police, what would happen to him?"

"You've got it wrong, Susan," said David gently. "Even if Mark were sitting on a thousand Swiss watches, he's not a smuggler until he tries to smuggle them into some other country." He turned to his sister. "Go over it all again with her. Find out anything we've maybe missed."

"While you do what, brother?" asked Helen dryly.

"Someone has to make new noises to the police. Like now."

Police Sub-Inspector Josef Bart showed little surprise when he heard Bannerman's story. He sat back in his office chair.

"It happens, Herr Bannerman." He shrugged. "This kind of smuggling, using tourists, is not new. But would a watch smuggler kill a tourist just because they disagreed? I don't see it."

"And the telephone call?"

"To Lollipop." Bart sucked hard on his lips. "Maybe her pet name wasn't as secret as she thought. It could have been a malicious crank —"

"Do you believe that?" Bannerman leaned his knuckles on the edge of the Swiss officer's desk. "Do you still think he's just buried under a snowdrift?"

"I am sorry." The sub-inspector grimaced. "I would need more. This close to the Eiger there is nothing unusual about visitors being killed in accidents." He paused, frowned, and rubbed his chin. "But—"

"But?" encouraged Bannerman.

"If you still want to talk with a smuggler, try an Italian named

Carlo Belzoni. Belzoni visits here a lot. This time he arrived about a month ago from Lucerne. He's—well—*liked* by most people. He was a top professional footballer in the Italian premier league, was even selected for international sides until he was badly injured in a car crash. No more football after that—so he became a smuggler." The sub-inspector snapped his fingers. "I could have him picked up if you want."

Bannerman shook his head. "If I go to him, it might be easier."

"Then try the Cafe Kleine Mönch. The man almost lives there."

The Kleine Mönch was shabby but warm and spotlessly clean. At that hour of the morning it was still almost empty, and as Bannerman entered, a waiter in a white jacket appeared at his elbow.

"I'm looking for someone." David Bannerman spoke loudly. "Someone named Carlo Belzoni."

"Over here." A tall, slim man at one of the tables set down the mug of coffee he'd been sipping and beckoned. There was a speculative glint in his eyes. "I am Carlo Belzoni. How can I help you, signor?"

Bannerman took a chair opposite him. Dressed in denim trousers with a green wool shirt and a dark leather jacket, Belzoni had thick black hair, a compact, muscular build, and a fine-boned face with an easy-going smile.

"Rumor has it you're in the smuggling business," said Bannerman without preliminaries.

"So I've heard." Belzoni gave a mild chuckle. "I've also heard about a couple newly arrived from Scot-

land to seek the unfortunate Signor Adams." He produced a small black cheroot, stuck it between his lips, and lit it with the flame from a gunmetal lighter. "I like your Scotland—except for the last time. I was a temporary guest in your Barlinnie Prison, which is cold and damp." He let the cheroot dangle and grimaced. "Ah—Signor Bannerman, isn't it?"

Bannerman nodded. "You've good contacts."

"I try," said Belzoni modestly. "But, my friend, I know nothing about your missing man. I might have made an arrangement with him, but—no, he said it would anger his new wife."

"Women," said Bannerman sadly.

"Women!" Belzoni made a noise like a sigh. "You have the wrong man, Mr. Bannerman—yet maybe I am the right choice in a different way. Can you be told something, then forget who told you?"

"When it helps."

"Buono." Belzoni gave a lopsided grin. "I would deny it anyway. It is true I come here now and again. To make contacts, then move on again. In my business it doesn't pay to stand still for too long—and the last thing I need is to be dragged into any part of the hunt for this Mark Adams. You understand?"

"I do."

"The local sub-inspector of police is efficient—but maybe this time he misses something. At this moment there is a John Gelling living in the same guesthouse as the Adamses. He has an English passport, but I say he is not English.

Now, I ask you, why does this 'not Englishman' carry a gun?"

"You're sure?"

"In my business you learn to spot things—the bulge under a jacket, the line of a leather harness." The smuggler signaled the waiter. "Grazie . . . two beers, Hans."

Belzoni gave a small smile. "This Gelling is not in the watch business. If he was, I should know. And there is something else."

"Hans." As the waiter returned with the beers, Belzoni laid a hand on his arm. "I was telling my friend of the unfortunate Signor Adams, the man who disappeared. You remember him?"

"Ja." The waiter picked up the ashtray and replaced it with a clean one. "A great pity, whatever happened."

"I met him here," mused Belzoni. "What about other people?"

"Others?" The man shrugged. "A couple of times I saw him with Herr Gelling." He saw the doubt on Bannerman's face. "It is easy enough to remember. Grindelwald is only a village. Right now we have few visitors."

They sipped their beers in silence until Bannerman sensed it was time to go.

"I'm grateful," he said, rising.

Belzoni smiled and lit another cheroot.

Outside, there were new snow-flecks in the air. But that didn't deter a wandering street photographer, who clicked his camera, then stuffed a leaflet into Bannerman's hand. The main winter tourist season was over; customers were obviously scarce.

When Bannerman got back to the guesthouse, he found his sister helping Susan go through her missing husband's belongings. Helen looked up as he entered. "Any luck?" she asked.

"Maybe yes, maybe no." Bannerman indicated the scattered clothing. "What's going on?"

"I had the bright idea that there might be something in his pockets." She scowled. "So far there isn't. How did the police react?"

"To the smuggling story?" Bannerman shrugged. "They listened, they didn't pay much attention." He turned to the fair-haired, sad-faced girl who had gone from being a bride to probably being a widow. "How many people have suggested you go home?"

"Just about everyone," she said wearily. "Including you."

"How about John Gelling?"

"Including John Gelling," she agreed. "But I'm staying."

"Good," said Bannerman softly. "Because I've changed my mind. Where's Gelling right now?"

"I saw him go out," said Helen blandly. "If you're interested, his room is third on the left, down the hall."

The hallway was deserted, and a strip of credit card plastic was enough to open the springlock on Gelling's door. Closing the door behind him, David began a quick, methodical search. Gelling traveled light but when Bannerman checked drawers in a chest and looked beneath some shirts, he found a small cardboard box. When he opened it, he saw he was right. It held two spare clips of Luger ammunition.

"Dave." His sister's low, urgent whisper reached him from outside the door. "Move. He's coming back."

Bannerman replaced the box, closed the drawer, and left the room. He heard Gelling's footsteps on the stairway, and they passed each other a moment later.

"Well?" Gelling greeted him hopefully. "Have you managed to persuade her to leave?"

"Not yet."

"Keep trying," urged Gelling. "For her own good."

Bannerman reported to his sister and Susan Adams a little later and told them what he'd found. "Susan, can you show us where the police say this avalanche happened?"

She nodded. "We can use our car—it's in a service station along the road. Mark put it in for an oil change, and I haven't used it since."

At the service station Mark's Volvo was ready. Bannerman paid the oil change bill, then slid into the driver's seat while the other two got aboard. From the service station they drove out of the village towards the white of the mountains; soon Susan guided them onto a narrow track that led towards the Eiger's lower slopes.

"Stop here," she said at last.

They stopped not far from one of the inevitable high-roofed chalets. As they got out, they could hear a tinkle of cowbells coming from a barn, where cattle were installed in their winter quarters. As they neared it, a farmer left the barn, and they stopped him.

They got his story in a mix of Swiss-German and English. Yes, he remembered the avalanche on

the day Mark Adams had disappeared. There'd been a loud noise just before it happened—and that noise, whatever it was, could have been enough to start the avalanche.

How loud? He shrugged. Loud just meant loud. He had no idea what had caused it.

"One of us should take a look," said Helen pensively.

"And you want me to volunteer?" Her brother accepted the inevitable.

They obtained more directions from the farmer; then Bannerman set off on his own along a narrow hill path. It rose sharply and was covered in snow that had been trampled hard by a number of feet, showing that at least one of the search parties had come that way.

In a very few minutes he had climbed to where there were signs of a huge slide of snow. It had swept across the path and spent itself in a gully below.

The police account had been accurate. If a body lay buried beneath that fall, it wouldn't be found until summer.

Bannerman stood for a moment breathing heavily after the climb, looking up at the heavy overhangs of snow still above him. He tensed as he saw a figure briefly appear, then duck out of sight higher up the slope.

The bang came seconds later. Then its echo was lost in a gathering growl as one of the largest snow overhangs began moving. Bannerman watched the giant white cornice topple and come racing down towards him.

The growl became a roar. Ban-

nerman turned and ran, floundering when his feet sank in soft patches of snow, forcing every muscle to go faster, knowing he couldn't afford to look round.

A cold wave of snow hit him, bowled him over, covered him in its dense white blanket. He struggled, fought, broke free and crawled his way out.

He had been close to the outer edge of the fall, and that had saved his life. Down below the new avalanche crashed to a halt on top of the old fall he'd seen earlier.

Half an hour later, a tumbler of the farmer's fiery plum brandy inside him, his clothes rough-dried, he sat in the front passenger seat while Helen drove back to Grindelwald. Susan Adams sat pale-faced and quiet in the rear.

The Bannermans had taken a couple of rooms in the same guest-house as Susan Adams. A change of clothing and another glass of local brandy left David feeling reasonably normal.

"Don't ever do a damned fool thing like that again," said his sister when she came into his room. "Who was it up there? Gelling or Belzoni?"

"My bet goes on Gelling," mused Bannerman. "Belzoni isn't the type who throws avalanches at people."

"I've a longshot notion," said Helen slowly. "Every time I've stuck my nose outdoors since we got here, I've seen a street photographer somewhere around."

"I've noticed," agreed Bannerman dryly, remembering his own earlier encounter. Then he under-

stood. "You mean, like suppose one of them photographed Mark on the day he disappeared?"

"And maybe with company." She nodded. "It's worth a try. I'll take a walk around the photo shops. Can you stay out of trouble until I get back?"

"I'll try," promised Bannerman. "And I'm going to talk to our sub-inspector of police about avalanches."

Sub-inspector Josef Bart could listen without a hint of anything showing on his face. But by the time Bannerman had finished, his attitude had changed.

"We don't tolerate murder, Herr Bannerman," he frowned. "Among other things it is bad for our tourist trade. And I'm ready to believe all you say, but what proof do we have?"

"Not a lot," admitted Bannerman. A new thought had struck him. "And even if someone was killed that way, that doesn't mean it was Mark Adams."

"I don't understand."

"I'm not sure I do either," admitted Bannerman. "But it could explain some loose ends—including why Gelling must have a reason to want to be rid of me. Suppose we give him some rope?"

The sub-inspector gave a slow, slightly reluctant nod. "All right. But a warning, my friend. Be careful you don't stick your own neck in a noose."

When Bannerman left the police station, the temperature seemed to have taken another sudden drop. He turned up his coat collar, began walking briskly towards the guest-

house, then heard feet hurrying behind him.

"Slow down, for the love of God," said a breathless Carlo Belzoni, limping to catch up with him in the gathering dusk. "First I risk my reputation waiting outside a police station, now you want me to risk a heart attack?"

"Sorry." Bannerman grinned.

"I hear you are a very lucky man," said Belzoni cheerfully.

"True."

"There's something else I heard, from—ah—someone else I know in the watch exporting business." Belzoni gave Bannerman a deliberate glance. "This Signor Gelling has visited several tourist centers lately—never staying long at any." He shrugged and sighed. "Mrs. Adams will be driving back to Scotland soon, I suppose? A sad journey."

As suddenly as he had arrived, he turned and limped away.

David Bannerman was the first back at the guesthouse. But Helen arrived a little later, smiling.

"I got lucky at the fourth photo shop I tried," she reported cheerfully. "Their street photographers proof print every photograph they take, then date stamp them." She slid a brown envelope across the table. "This was taken on the morning Mark Adams vanished."

Bannerman opened the envelope. The photograph inside showed two men walking down Grindelwald's main street. One was Mark Adams; the other had deliberately turned his head away from the camera, one hand going up towards his face.

"Gelling?" suggested Helen.

"It could be," frowned Bannerman. "He's the same build. But that isn't enough. Where's Susan?"

"Probably in her room. I'll check."

She was gone briefly and brought Susan Adams when she returned.

"Susan says Gelling looked in on her while we were out."

"And it was the same old tune," said Susan bitterly. "How sorry he was, how he really thought I should go home."

"Belzoni made the same kind of noises." Bannerman stared at the street photographer's print again. "Maybe he was telling me something in his own roundabout way. You've had no more phone calls?"

She shook her head.

When Susan went home, the Volvo would go with her. He glanced at his wristwatch. The car was back in the service station, which by now would probably be closed for the night.

What they had to do could wait.

Next morning the Bannermans joined Susan for breakfast, made sure she didn't plan to leave the village for the rest of the day, then went out on their own. By nine thirty they were at the service station, where a middle-aged mechanic was at work in the lubrication bay. He knew they'd taken the Volvo out the previous day.

"Did much need doing when you serviced her?" asked David.

"Very little, whatever he expected." The mechanic shrugged. "We had it for a couple of days, just lying in a corner. Then he turned up, said he wanted to try the car, and drove it away for a spell. When he

returned, he wanted the handbrake adjusted a little. I said okay, he went away—" he grimaced "—then came the avalanche."

Helen frowned. "His wife told us that from the time the Volvo was left here it wasn't taken out again until yesterday."

"She was wrong." The mechanic smiled down at her dark, earnest eyes.

"Was he alone when he collected his car?"

"Ja." The man scratched his chin. "And still alone when he came back."

It took a small wad of Swiss francs before the mechanic became enthusiastic. Then they began. First they checked the entire interior but drew a blank. The mechanic put the Volvo on a ramp and raised it almost shoulder-high, then examined the underside. When he reached the fuel tank, the Bannermans saw him hesitate.

"Found something?" asked Helen.

"I think so, *fraulein*." He frowned. "This tank has small marks, as if something has been done to it." He eyed them wisely. "Much can be done to a fuel tank if you are a smuggler. Shall we look?"

"Not yet." She stopped him as he turned towards the tools on his workbench. "When a car comes in, do you make a note of the mileage readings?"

"Kilometers." He nodded. "Always."

"Can you bring it, and a good local map? And I need the car's present reading."

The man was gone for a couple of

minutes, then returned with the Volvo's service sheet and a map. He spread the map on his workbench.

"You're the brains," David told his sister. "Go ahead."

She borrowed a stub of pencil from the mechanic and used a corner of the map for a scribbled calculation using the present reading, first subtracting the short distance they'd driven the previous day, then the Volvo's recorded mileage when it first reached the service station. What was left meant that the car had traveled fourteen miles on the vital day. At a guess, that meant seven miles out, seven miles back again.

Seven miles—to where? They needed the mechanic's help again.

He studied the map, then used an oily finger to trace a narrow road that ran close to the avalanche site.

"Maybe here," he suggested. "The old Braunheim chalet. I've heard that new people have moved in there."

"Good," Helen said softly. She glanced at her brother. "And now we get hold of your friendly police sub-inspector?"

"Suppose you do that," said her brother. "Have him here before that fuel tank is opened, and tell him the rest of it." He gave her a grin. "I'll go and take a look at this chalet."

Bannerman borrowed the mechanic's ancient Renault van and was on his way. Fresh light snow was falling, and the old van's single windshield wiper slapped busily as it rattled along the narrow, empty road. Slowly the contours he'd seen

on the service station map came to life, and at last he saw a turnoff just ahead and an old chalet at the end of it. Ruts in the snow showed that vehicles had used the track recently.

He left the Renault behind a hump of rock and continued on foot through the snow until at last he was close to the Braunheim chalet. It was an old wooden structure with a high-peaked roof and small shuttered windows. The wheel tracks led past its front door and round to a barn at the rear. Bannerman worked his way around again, got even closer, cleared snow from the barn's single window, and was surprised to look in at a modern, well-equipped garage. He could even see what looked like a portable welding plant.

He switched his attention to the chalet. A thin curl of smoke was rising from the main chimney. There was no other sign of life of any kind, but there was only one way to be certain. Crossing to it, he used a billet of wood to smash a ground floor window. He reached in, freed the lock, and seconds later was standing in the chalet's kitchen near the glowing warmth of a wood stove.

Swiftly, with growing confidence, he checked the other rooms. They were empty but with signs that the place was being used, and when he returned to the kitchen, he heard a strange thumping that seemed to come from under the floor. The thumping led him to a cellar trapdoor. When he drew back the bolts and raised the lid, a pale, unshaven face peered up from the darkness.

"And who the hell are you?" asked the man below in a weary yet hopeful voice.

"Call me the cavalry—if you're Mark Adams." Bannerman offered a hand to help him out. "Right now you're supposed to be dead."

"I'm Adams." The missing bridegroom emerged into the light, blinking and unshaven, his clothes grubby and crumpled. "And no, I'm not dead."

"Did you tell Gelling that your pet name for Susan was Lollipop?"

"Yes." Adams moistened his lips. "He said he'd get word to her to do what she was told; then I'd be okay." He swallowed and looked around. "Where are they? I heard them going out—"

"Them? How many?"

"Gelling and two others. They're armed."

"Then let's move. The police are on their way."

He hustled Adams towards the open window. They were through it and outside when they heard the sound of an approaching car and the rattle of its chains. It stopped outside the chalet, and its passengers climbed out.

"Run!" ordered Bannerman. "Head up the slope!"

Thrashing through the snow, they'd covered some two hundred yards before the men boiled out of a rear door of the chalet. Shouts showed they'd been seen; two pistol shots barked wildly at them from below. Startled, Mark stumbled and fell, and as Bannerman helped him up again, Gelling and his men toiled towards them.

A sudden intervention came from

a rock ledge only twenty feet or so above Bannerman's head.

"*Attenzione*, stay down there!" Carlo Belzoni was standing out in the open. In one hand he held a lightweight grenade. He gave Bannerman a grin, then shouted again. "You can see what I'm holding, Gelling. Behave!"

The men had halted as if frozen. A long, broad overhang of snow loomed above them, yet Belzoni was safe on a jutting outcrop of rock. The same outcrop could protect Bannerman and Adams. The Italian smuggler beckoned, and first Bannerman, then Adams, joined him on the ledge.

"Belzoni—" John Gelling took a few steps forward on his own, his voice echoing upwards "—we could do a deal."

"A deal like you handed to my good friend Guido—who wasn't ready for dying?" countered Belzoni curtly.

"Guido!" Mark Adams gave a gasp. "You knew him?"

"He was my partner," said Belzoni softly, keeping one eye on the men below. "He was watching Gelling, knowing he was moving into our territory." He sighed. "It's good to see you again, Signor Adams. Do you know what happened to Guido?"

"Yes. Except I didn't know his name until afterwards." Adams gave an unhappy nod. "It was when I took the Volvo to the chalet to have the fake fuel tank fitted. They spotted someone sneaking around. Once they'd changed fuel tanks, I was told to drive the Volvo back to the service station—"

Guido had followed him. But Gelling and his men came along, too, using Mark Adams as bait. In the struggle that followed, Belzoni's partner was shot and killed by Gelling. Adams was seized because he'd seen too much.

"They said they'd dump the body and fake an avalanche. Then they locked me in the cellar." The rescued bridegroom stopped and gave a warning gasp. "Watch out—"

Below, Gelling and his men were running, making a dash for safety. Unemotionally Carlo Belzoni flicked the safety pin from the grenade and threw the grenade in an arc. Briefly it was a black speck curving above the snow.

A loud blast sounded, and seconds later a gathering, growling slide of white was on the move, sweeping its way downhill. One moment Gelling and his men were still running, still trying for safety. The next, they had vanished.

And all that was left was silence.

"Only a baby-sized avalanche," said Belzoni almost apologetically. "If people insist, I expect these three can be dug out alive." He brushed some snow from his jacket. "Signor Adams, you were lucky not to end up dead beside my friend Guido—except that maybe they thought a live hostage might be useful."

"Particularly if they had to persuade Susan Adams to drive the Volvo back to Britain," Bannerman said. "She'd be a gift. Who'd want to make things awkward for a tragic widow traveling home?" He paused. "Belzoni, how the hell did you get here anyway?"

"I've been following you since

first thing this morning," said the onetime footballer cheerfully. "But now I'll leave you. Too much publicity is bad in my business." He gave a dry smile. "Signor Adams, this I know. It wouldn't have been watches you carried for John Gelling."

"Definitely not watches," said Sub-inspector Josef Bart some time later.

Belzoni was gone before a three-car convoy of police reached the old chalet. The police quickly extracted their three prisoners from the snow, men too glad to be alive to have any fight left in them.

"You were foolish, Herr Adams," said the sub-inspector once there was time to check. "Your Volvo's altered fuel tank had acquired a new compartment that contained four kilos of heroin—a small fortune for any dealer."

Susan Adams had also arrived and was holding onto her husband as if she'd never let go.

"I wish I could have thanked Belzoni," she murmured.

Mark Adams shook his head. "I don't think he'll come near us again."

He was wrong.

First there were family celebrations on both sides of the Atlantic—with an extra celebration as the news helped Mark Adams' mother to recover. Then, a week after the Adamses finished their honeymoon break and returned home, a visitor limped into the Banner Agency office in Edinburgh.

Inevitably, it was Belzoni.

"Exactly what are you after?"

asked David Bannerman suspiciously.

"Me?" Carlo Belzoni frowned and turned to Helen. "Do I deserve that, signorina?"

"Probably." She winked at her brother. "Carlo, if you're looking for any kind of a reward—"

"No need," smiled Belzoni. He put an envelope in front of David. "The young lovebirds had their Volvo—ah—borrowed last night. This tells them where to find it, with only some incidentals removed."

"Watches?" Bannerman groaned.

"What else?" Belzoni chuckled. "And an excellent profit for everyone—including the bride, of course. She deserved her share. We came

to an agreement immediately after she got her husband back."

Helen nursed her head in her hands for a moment and tried not to laugh. "Her husband doesn't know?"

"Husbands should never know," said Belzoni. He blinked as the daily one o'clock gun fired from Edinburgh Castle with a bang that vibrated through the room. "The unexpected is always best." He considered Helen with an undisguised interest. "Now I would like to take both of you to lunch. Somewhere suitably expensive, eh?"

"My brother has a meeting," said Helen Bannerman firmly. Her eyes twinkled. "But I haven't—and I'm hungry. Lead on!"

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Dragons

Sharon Mackey

I held my breath and ducked into the upstairs eaves of Prudence Geasley's Victorian, unable to suppress the feeling.

It was shock, I suppose, then sheer anger, when I first discovered my late husband Jeb and Eva Wadsell in the catacombs of his law office "looking for something" as Jeb had so eloquently put it. I tried not to remember the scene: Eva giggling, scrambling for her Chinese mother-of-pearl comb and Jeb, shoeless with a face full of frosted-pink smears.

After that Jeb swore he'd never venture *there* again, although I suspected he'd carried on in other dark and sundry places with other reckless and irrelevant women.

I whacked at a cobweb, bumping my head on the slanted ceiling, my shins grazing cardboard boxes stacked in the vicinity of alphabetical order.

Years ago Prudie had raised the rent five dollars when Jeb had asked permission to store "dead" files in what he'd dubbed "the catacombs." Lawyers had to keep everything, he'd said. Malpractice claims were rampant. You get rid of something today, and the next day they want it on a silver platter with a serving of smoked salmon and dill sauce.

I rooted toward some peeling magnolia wallpaper around the chimney, grabbed the entire carton of M's, and ducked back through the

doorway, smacking my crown on the way out.

I dropped the box on Jeb's pressed pecan desk thinking a lawyer's work was never done, especially a dead lawyer's work. I knew lawsuits weren't limited to the living, that malpractice claims could also be brought against the paltry estate of a formerly careless, now deceased lawyer like Jeb. That's why I wasn't exactly waxing nostalgic. As far as I knew, he'd left me with no will whatsoever, his law office rent, and an address book full of Tammies and Mimis and Darlas.

I couldn't find the deed. Ernest Minks' vulture neighbors were putting up chain-link faster than an uphill semi could churn exhaust, and I had to find the deed to his sixty acres, the deed my late husband had failed to record at the Poke County Clerk's office twelve years ago.

My fingers rustled the tops of the manila folders. It was unfair, the pressure I was feeling to satisfy Jeb's already unsatisfied clients. The law office had closed the day after his heart attack. And besides, the place was now my part-time investigative headquarters where I occasionally took orders to retrieve stolen bicycles or spy on unfaithful spouses. If things really got hopping, I might be asked to find somebody's lost dog, who could be identified by no collar and a mild case of the mange.

I found Myrick, Mason, McClary. The files were nowhere near in alphabetical order. I'd almost exhausted the entire M section when I saw the Murdock name filed next to Meeples. MURDOCK, JEB E. I jerked the manila folder out of its slot, opened it, and stood there. I vaguely remember my mouth dropping open and the sound of the rotating fan rustling a legal pad on the desk behind me.

Inside the folder was the will I'd thought never existed, a document Jeb drew up for himself four years ago, six years after we married.

It was a standard draft with a peculiar ending. Jeb had bequeathed all his worldly goods to me, "especially the Eastlake walnut secretary, which I hope she will cherish since it was left to me by my Granddaddy O'Neil Murdock and holds a sacred and undeniable truth in the bottom drawer."

I read it again. And again. Sacred and undeniable? It didn't sound like Jeb. And why couldn't he have just stated his truth right there in the will? Probably in too much of a hurry to meet one of his redheaded conquests, perhaps the one who misfiled his will.

Furthermore, the Eastlake secretary was a nine foot tall monstrosity with the one redeeming quality of a small amount of burlled wood along the upper cabinet edges. Besides that, I'd already cleaned it out and sold the thing to an antique dealer named Nell last summer because I hadn't entirely cherished it as Jeb had hoped. I in fact loathed Jeb's Eastlake secretary. One of the reasons being that the now note-

worthy bottom drawer, the only drawer, stuck. Actually, the drawer had a small keyhole, and Jeb had always claimed he'd locked it and accidentally lost the key (with Jeb everything was an accident). I'd halfheartedly tried to pop the drawer open with a bobby pin before I sold it, figuring there was nothing of value there.

The stepback, he had called it. Grampy's Eastlake stepback.

I don't remember how long I sat in front of the fan with Jeb's will in my lap, another one of his bombshell surprises. I was smack in the middle of my summer vacation from teaching high school algebra to the brazen juveniles of Deerfoot, Tennessee, and I'd fully intended to spend the weeks enjoying the unfettered company of Clint Knuckles, the new history teacher at Deerfoot High. His mustache reminded me of a thin Clark Gable. And he'd promised me my first official date as a widow that very evening—buttered popcorn and a decent movie at the Hippodrome Theater.

One thing was certain, I fully did not intend to spend my summer traipsing around Poke County looking for some walnut malformation with a stuck drawer. Jeb's stepback could be in North Dakota for all I knew. Also, I wasn't certain what he might've deemed sacred and undeniable.

Until my eyes wandered toward Jeb's prized print of Thomas Jefferson on the wall near the doorway.

Sacred and undeniable truths? It was in the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson's original text.

Goosebumps materialized on my

forearms, and I wondered what could ever be more sacred and undeniable than the truth. I suddenly knew how Jeb had chosen his words so carefully sitting there at his desk four years ago.

"Shoot-fire," I said, and grabbed my Deerfoot directory.

Nell's place wasn't listed in the phone book, and I'd driven six miles before stopping a codger at a gas station for directions. He pointed down a worn asphalt road and told me Nell's was at the edge of Poke County, "the last stop on the shady road to nowhere."

Three more miles and I saw it nestled between two willow trees, a gray painted farmhouse with one sloping gable in front rendering NELL'S ELEGANT JUNK in bold turquoise letters. Except for a maroon El Camino in the parking lot, the place seemed deserted.

Inside, there was an oak counter holding up an old fashioned cash register and an untidy stack of children's drawings, dragons with dimples, scales, eyelashes. Cracked endtables were stacked on dusty buffets, sepia-colored pictures hung crookedly on the walls, a couple of loveseats were spread with vintage linens. The only voices came from the back. Maybe Nell, I thought.

I wandered back there ready to explain myself, Jeb's will, how I needed to make sure there'd been nothing in the drawer when I tossed it out with the wave of an indifferent hand. . . .

That's when I became aware of my breathing; the muscles in my throat. Jeb's stepback was crashed

facedown on a nine foot stretch of stairs, a filigreed chandelier dangling high above like a spotlight . . . then I saw the hand, a human palm, slightly open, purple, brushing one of the white painted spindles.

I hadn't spoken to the couple, a middle-aged woman holding onto the banister's curlicue and making a feeble effort at lifting the top of the stepback and a scrawny elderly man in an untucked shortsleeved shirt tugging from the top of the stairs.

I swallowed, managed an "oh no," and grabbed a corner, trying to help lift the thing. "Lift it straight," I said through gritted teeth. "We don't want to damage the body."

"Did you hear that, Hancil? Lift it straight up." She duplicated my words like a screeching parrot.

I felt the weight of the stepback as I tried to raise it, but the angle was awkward. The outside corners were wedged against some shattered spindles, and there was no way to lift it more than a fraction of an inch.

The woman blotted her catlike eyes with a filmy handkerchief, then waved it in the victim's direction. "It's bound to be Nell. We live down the road, the trailer. Came in here not ten minutes ago and found her plumb smashed up under that thing. Lord." She dabbed.

"We got an episode here," said Hancil. His knees creaked as he stood up, his hands bony wisps on his hips. "Cain't lift the thing, Rosalie, must weigh nine hundred pounds."

I felt my face warm and pale at the same time. "Has anybody called the police? An ambulance?" I asked.

The woman's hair was short bleached blonde and curly. She was dressed from head to toe in Pepto-Bismol pink, a skirt, blouse, and bubblegum colored pumps that looked brand new. She looked up at Hancil with an inquiring mind. He rubbed his day-old beard. "This is not a quiz show, folks," I said.

"There was no time," said Hancil. "We thought she might still be alive." He pinched a pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket.

They watched as I got a foothold several steps up, then took a pulse. There was none. A yellowed tag on the back of the stepback read *East-lake, walnut, Plantation: Stepback Secretary, early 1800's*.

Rosalie wagged a finger all over the place. "I told her not to be movin' this junk around by herself, there was bound to be an accident sooner or later. Bound to be. She wasn't careful enough, not near careful enough. I told her you got to watch it around here—"

"We got an episode," said Hancil. He was lighting a cigarette.

I remembered a telephone near the cash register and tripped over an old wicker baby buggy trying to get back. They scurried after me, Rosalie casually looking under chairs, buffets, inside armoires.

The wall phone was black, archaic. I shot around the counter and picked up the receiver.

"Doesn't work. It's just for looks," said Rosalie, "Nell don't have a phone." Hancil was out on the porch blowing smoke rings. Through the screen door I heard him call out a name. Mary.

I glanced at the drawings again.

The top one was of a lone, cute dragon with a cloud of thought. Inside the cloud children were holding hands with the dragon, riding on his back, laughing. There was no clue as to the identity of the artist. "Was someone else here, a child?" I asked.

Hancil answered through the screen door. "Nell's niece. She—"

"I'll tell it, Hancil!" Rosalie was twisting the handkerchief in a tight spiral. "We were goin' on vacation, just got packed, then *she*, Nell's little niece, rode to the trailer on her bike all out of breath. Said Nell was in trouble, said Nell was plumb smashed up under some heavy thing. When we got here, I knew there was no way Hancil and me could lift it, I watched a half dozen men carry it in here months ago. See, Nell lives in the back of the antique shop and she bought that walnut thing to put in her bedroom, but it wouldn't fit in the back door so she had 'em take it up the stairs through the little hallway that leads to the back. Trouble was, it wouldn't fit through that door either, so she had to just leave it there at the top of them stairs." She took a breath and checked her nails. Pink.

"We have to call somebody, report the death," I said for what seemed like the hundredth time. "And we need to find the girl."

The handkerchief fluttered. "Hancil!" He hopped out of the way as she shoved through the door. I followed in her wake of dime-store perfume. "You stay here and wait for the girl while I run to the trailer and call somebody. Uh, thank you—" she said to me.

"Marcy Murdock. I live in town, in Deerfoot."

"You kin to the lawyer?" Rosalie stopped digging around in her purse and made eye contact with me.

"Late husband."

"Small world, ain't it?" I felt her sudden twinge, a connection she was making behind her mossy green eyes. "I believe we can take care of everything here." She rummaged through the purse. "Hancil'll wait," she said as if that were my cue to leave, which I had no intention of doing. Not with Nell lying unattended under my drawer full of sacred and undeniable truths and a frightened child on the loose.

Rosalie brandished a pink rabbit's foot key chain and was headed toward the El Camino. "Tell the sheriff to bring three strong deputies," I called.

The body had been removed, and he'd heard the whole story from Rosalie Sikes Timmons and her newly wedded husband Hancil. Sheriff Don Earl Keck paced across the wide front porch of Nell's Elegant Junk, then propped his black shoe on the crate where I sat. And I was ready. Ready for "There's no murder here, Marcy," or "You can go on home to your spy novels now, Marcy," or perhaps "My, my, my, you do get around, don't you, Marcy."

But all he said was, "What do you think?" with what sounded vaguely like respect. I could smell the Juicy Fruit gum he was folding into his partial plate while I searched for an answer.

"I'm worried, sheriff," I said. Not an hour had passed since I'd seen

Nell Hopper's palm and wrist, lifeless, the only visible sign of her body caught beneath Jeb's humongous piece of walnut.

He nodded thoughtfully, gnawing the gum while I took the privilege of speaking my mind a bit further. "First, there's the question of how, Don Earl. How did it happen? How did—"

"Furniture doesn't move all by itself," he said. I agreed. Then he stood up and motioned me to the edge of the porch out of earshot from Rosalie, who was telling Hancil how to smush out his cigarette. Don Earl's voice was as deep as a toad's. "That's what I was thinking, Marcy, but it *could* have been an accident. Nell could have been trying to move the thing herself—"

"Or somebody could've pushed it down those stairs on top of her."

He bristled. Murder was sometimes complicated, and Don Earl was not a complicated man. Also, he hated being interrupted, but I couldn't help it. "We need to question the girl if she turns up," I said. Another faux pas. It sounded too much like an order. I couldn't help that either.

He placed a thumb in his black leather holster and walked over to the squad car with a bothered look. Rosalie and Hancil were rearranging suitcases, a lamp, an ironing board in the back of the El Camino. "She'll turn up," said Rosalie to everybody, holding up a can of something perspiry wrapped in the handkerchief. I wondered if they were still going on vacation.

I could barely see the stepback through Nell's front windows. It was propped at the bottom of the stairs

now, an upright angular blob. No one had been allowed in the shop after the sheriff had arrived, and I hadn't had a chance to tug on my bottom drawer.

I heard the static of the squad car's radio as the sheriff put out an ABP on Nell's niece. "No trespassing, Marcy," he said before I hopped in Jeb's truck and drove away.

I remembered my date with Clint Knuckles and spotted my stowaway at the same time. Her small sunburned arms and ponytail loomed from the brown canvas in back of my truck like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon. I gently hit the brakes and pulled under a shade tree on the side of the road. She dodged my reflection in the rear view mirror.

I got out of the truck, checking off my mental list of what else could go wrong today. "Are you okay under there?" I said. "It's awfully hot. You can ride with me in the truck if you want to."

I was drumming my fingers on the side of the cab.

She threw the canvas away and sat up, perspiration dripping from her flushed face. She looked down the road toward Nell's place. "What about Aunt Nell? They get that thing off her?" Her voice was slightly hoarse.

"Yes, honey. They got it off." I knew better than to ask all the questions reeling through my head. Why didn't you come when we called? Don't you know better than to hide in a stranger's truck, I could've been an axe murderer for heaven's sake? "By the way, I'm Marcy," I said.

She ignored my offer of a hand-

shake, squinting from a square of sunlight that fell between the tree limbs. "I don't wanna go back there. You live in town?" she asked.

I hesitated. Not that I don't like kids. I do. I used to be one. But I *did* have that date with Clint, and I *wasn't* running a babysitting service, and even if I was, I didn't see anybody handing out five dollar bills.

"Don't you know where you live?" she said, shading her face with a little hand.

"I do, um, live in town," I said out of pure guilt, shifting my feet. "You like ice cream?" I added.

She shed the canvas, climbed over the truck's gate, and said, "I'll have a popsicle."

Her name was America Joyce Brumbeck, but everybody called her Merry, like Merry Christmas. And she had just turned eight years old. Other than that she didn't say a word the rest of the way back except to tell me Ed's Dairy Cheer had color-change popsicles in Neon Lime, Tutti Frutti, and something I understood to be Mega Melon Fizz. I watched while she slurped and dripped a Neon Lime all over the seat of my truck, then with her sticky fingers tucked strands of light brown hair behind her ears.

I followed her up my office steps noticing the popsicle smudges on her backside where she'd wiped her hands. She plopped down behind Jeb's desk, pried a folded-up drawing and a key from her denim shorts pockets, and unwrinkled the drawing, leaving her lime fingerprints around the border. Another dragon, this time with sneakers and an

umbrella. She found a pen and started to draw, adding ears and claws. Her ponytail moved from side to side as she concentrated, another claw, another scale. The light brown strands fell around her face.

I leaned an arm on the desk. "Nell was your aunt, right?" She nodded, barely. "Where do your parents live?"

"In Ohio. But they're in Guatemala right now. They do missionary stuff out there. I was stayin' with Aunt Nell for the summer." Her nose crinkled.

I began watering the droopy plants on the windowsill. "The sheriff found your mom and dad's phone number in Nell's house. He's gonna let them know you're safe," I said. "They'll be here as soon as possible."

She sat up straight, tapping the pen. "Ed's also has Cherry Bomb-bomb," she said, looking over her shoulder at me with the most soulful eyes I'd ever seen. They were the color of topaz, large, familiar eyes that made me forget about the step-back and the popsicle and my date with Clint. The ponytail bobbed around, and she drew a long snaky tail without looking up. "Aunt Nell's dead, isn't she?"

I spilled water on my shoes. "I'm afraid so, Merry. I'm sorry."

"That's what I thought," she said. She was drawing again. The dragon would wear a baseball cap. "I've only known her sometimes. My mom and dad are doctors, they go to India, Bolivia, Chicago, places like that where poor people need shots. You know, vaccinations. When they can't take me along, I stay with Aunt Nell at her antique shop. It's always in

the summertime." She printed her name at the bottom of the drawing, adding a star to the end of the y.

I pulled up a stool and sat beside her. "Nell was pretty nice, huh?"

She nodded. "She let me sit by the cash register and draw. She loved all that stuff in there. I did, too. It smelled like the olden days. We played hide-and-seek in there sometimes. She's got an ugly boyfriend who brings in all that stuff by the truckload. She made him and a bunch of other men put that big old thing at the top of the stairs, you know that big black thing that fell on top of her. She was trying to get it into her house, the back part, where she lives. When that didn't work, she told 'em to set it at the top of the stairs for now so we could all see how big and beautiful it was. She talked about furniture like it was people. Her boyfriend wanted that big chest for free, but she wouldn't let him have it. She said she wanted it for herself. Must've been worth a gazillion dollars." Her grin was subdued, fake.

She tapped the pen slowly, thinking. "My mom and dad might let me stay here all summer. I could sleep on that couch." She pointed with the pen to a sofa in the loft area of my office. This time, her smile went all the way up to her gums. My scowl was minor. She crossed her legs, pink from the sun, found a clean legal pad on the desk, and sketched. Baby dragons followed a big dragon across the page. "What kinda office is this, anyhow? P.I. What's that?"

"I help—"

"Is it like a detective?" She lifted the pen and frowned at me. I sort of

nodded. "Wow. You have a magnifier glass and stuff like that?" Her eyes were two melting caramels.

"Not really—"

"You spy on bad people?" She'd stopped drawing altogether.

"It's a little different—"

"You gonna find out who killed Aunt Nell?" She swiveled the chair around.

"I thought it was an accident," I said, cautiously.

"Somebody pushed that thing over." She swiveled about, unnerving me.

I tried to shrug. "Aunt Nell was probably tugging on a drawer and—" She spun around, one full turn. I stopped the chair with my arm. "What happened, Merry?"

"You'll let me stay here?"

No, no, no, no, no. The sheriff is coming to get you, he'll make arrangements for you to stay in some other strange place until your parents can get here. I couldn't say it. What I said was ten times worse. "Merry, honey, I have to go to the movies with somebody, a man somebody. It's a date, and, well—" I sounded so foolish I couldn't finish. Besides that her mouth was starting to pucker. "Okay, Merry, okay. You won't have to leave here until your parents come. Tell me, what happened?" Now my voice was too intense.

She sighed, started another dragon, this time a tall skinny one wearing polka dots. "They acted funny when I told 'em about Aunt Nell. I rode over there on my bike, and I was pulling on Miss Rosalie's arm to come help, and she just told that Hancil man to put the ironing board

in the back of the car. I rode back to the shop, and they came after me."

"Where were you when Nell— when the accident happened?"

"At Ed's Dairy Cheer. I ride down there on my bike every day after lunch for a popsicle. It's not that far."

I stifled my urge to count the number of popsicles she'd devoured in an afternoon. "Nell had given you permission to ride down to Ed's? And she was okay before you left?" I was walking semicircles behind her.

"Yeah." She was nodding, the ponytail bobbing furiously. "I hid my bike under the porch, then got under a drop table in Aunt Nell's shop, and they came in there to find me. I said a prayer, then you came in."

I have to admit I was flattered, being an object of divine intervention and all, but I couldn't stop thinking about the El Camino packed with boxes, a lamp, the ironing board. Rosalie had said they were going on vacation, and I'd been confused, wondering what kind of original oddball would take an ironing board and a lamp on vacation. "Are you saying they were just pretending to help Nell?" I asked.

She nodded.

"They got all interested in it the minute you walked in." The dragon wore clown shoes.

"Was Rosalie nice to you, before?"

"Kind of. She'd come in to shop for knickknacks and stuff. Sometimes she'd buy me coloring books and stickers. I liked her okay until today. She called me a name. I didn't like the way she said it." She drew little dragon puppets on the skinny drag-

on's outstretched hands. "Do you think I'm vinegary?"

"Nope. But I like vinegar. Used to drink it right out of the bottle when I was your age." She laughed, high and giggly, then got back to the dragon.

I wandered around the office in the same circle, remembering Rosalie's words after I'd introduced myself. *Small world* . . . I rifled through a couple of drawers in Jeb's file cabinet, but I couldn't find a file on Rosalie Sikes or anybody named Timmons, then opened the closet door in the loft area and braved the catacombs again, this time feeling nothing but a sense of urgency I hadn't experienced in a long time.

I hoisted out a box of files containing the S's and T's, then shut the closet door with my foot, catching sight of Rosalie Timmons herself strutting up my office steps wearing the same pink outfit hanging off her thin bony frame. Her mouth was set in a permanent frown as she reached the top step. I continued to hold the box.

"I could cause you a lot of trouble." She shook a finger in my face. "Taking that child off like that in that rickety old rattletrap of a truck! That's what I'd call kidnapping." I glanced at Merry, who'd already scampered beneath the desk.

"She's just fine here with me, and besides, I called the sheriff—"

"Sheriff! He don't have the right to give you permission to take an unknown child into your home!" I noticed Hancil toddling across the service porch outside. Rosalie stiffened, reminding me of her ironing board, and held her voice low. "She knows

me, Miss Murdock, and I will take her home with me now. Merry? Merry, honey-pie?" She proceeded to flit about my loft like a pink mosquito. "Come to Miss Rosalie, sweetheart, I've got some dumplin's on the stove. Is Merry hungry?"

I dropped the box and stood in front of my office door, propping my arms against the door casings. She actually laid a hand on me, trying to push her curly bleached head under my arm. "Merry, I am taking you home!" She shook her spindly fists in the air and stomped her pink shoes to make her point.

"Over my dead body," I said, fresh out of dignity.

"We'll see about that." She glared, then marched down the stairs and out the door.

"We'll see about that," I mocked, sitting on the floor and rummaging like a maniac for an incriminating file.

"She gone?" called Merry from somewhere over my shoulder. Two little arms wrapped themselves around my neck.

"Gone as a goose," I said, squeezing her hands. She tiptoed to the window and stared out, like a little princess trapped in a castle, waiting, wondering about her future. . . .

Rosalie Sikes' file, almost five years old, was near the bottom of the box in a thick gray folder. I sat on the floor, Merry tapping her pen on the desk, and read a judgment denying an adoption petition on the grounds that "Petitioner Rosalie J. Sikes is not a person suitable for the above task." The decision was based on a prior felony conviction, referencing case #90-CI-682.

I scribbled the case file number on my hand and asked Prudence Geasley to babysit Merry for an hour or so while I made a little trip to the county seat of Jones' Fork for a dose of paydirt.

It was late afternoon and the line in the circuit court clerk's office extended into the hallway. I elbowed my way toward the snack machine in front and saw, of all people, Eva Wadsell, Jeb's one time honeybun, who just happened to be the new deputy court clerk. She was sitting behind her desk mourning a paper cut, jangling a gaggle of bangle bracelets while an elderly woman in a wheelchair who was first in line complained about the snack machine. No peanut butter nabs. I could see the gray metal cabinets behind Eva with the case numbers labeled on the drawers. I cleared my throat loudly. Eva told the lady to sign on the X, pretending not to know who I was. "I'd like to review a case file, please," I said with the warmth of an icicle.

"Case file? I don't recall you being a law school graduate," Eva said with a smirk, briefly looking up.

"I'm workin' on a case, Eva. It's very important. A child's safety may be at stake."

"Sorry." She blew on her paper cut. "You gotta be a lawyer to see a file, and you ain't a lawyer." She gave me a quick goodbye wave.

I moved away from the desk faking an exit and thinking the day Eva Wadsell had an impact on my life would be the day I took up cocktail waitressing on a Playboy yacht. I wasn't above sneaking or making

a fool of myself, not if it was for Merry Brumbeck or, in my philandering late husband's words, "the quest for justice."

I'd neared the hallway when the woman in the wheelchair backed up, causing a domino effect on the line of people behind her. Somebody rammed into the snack machine and landed on the linoleum.

Eva left her post with a handful of Band-Aids, gooing and gushing all over whoever it was lying on the floor and giving me the chance to do something I seldom do, scuttle like a crab. I got around behind her desk to the cabinet with Rosalie's case file, jerked open the drawer, pulled the file out, shut the drawer with an elbow. I scuttled back into the hallway, Eva's bracelets clanging like dinnerbells while she tried to open a Ninja Turtle Band-Aid with two-inch-long fingernails.

I found a quiet place in the hallway and read bits and pieces of a trial transcript, a trial that had been appealed. The felony charge was for first degree assault. Rosalie Sikes had passed a stopped schoolbus twelve years ago and hit a child as he was crossing the street. The child, a boy, lived but sustained a major injury to his femur, causing a noticeable limp. The parents, Rosalie's ex-husband and his wife, claimed the assault was intentional. The prosecutor had gone into Rosalie's past, citing multiple miscarriages while married to the ex-husband, and called Rosalie "a childless woman ravaged with spite." The motive was sheer envy.

I slid the folder next to Eva Wadsell's Rolodex and slunk down the

hallway. Maybe I wasn't the answer to a prayer after all. Maybe America Joyce Brumbeck was an uncanny judge of human character. Maybe her good sense, her instinct, had caused her to sneak into the pickup truck of a stranger and be carried a safe distance away from someone she felt was untrustworthy. And then maybe, as she said, my showing up wasn't coincidence at all. . . .

I found a pay phone and called Prudie. Merry had cried in the bathtub over her Aunt Nell for a few minutes, then consumed half a cantaloupe and a hot dog with mustard and was currently sitting in the parlor perusing a box of Russell Stovers. Clint Knuckles had driven by three times or four, Prudie couldn't remember.

I rolled down the windows in Jeb's truck to freshen my brain. Poor Merry. And poor Clint. He'd been stood up by the teacher voted Most Likely to Have a Bad Hair Day by Deerfoot High's senior class. I figured it would be a miracle if he ever called again.

Dark clouds were swelling in the west, and blustery winds had kicked up all over Deerfoot. I couldn't fathom the train of thought that skirted the edge of my sanity—Rosalie's insistence that Nell's disaster was an accident, her reluctance to tell me about the girl, the packed El Camino waiting for takeoff to somewhere, to anywhere she could get away. None of it was enough for a conviction of first degree murder. Rosalie's fingerprints got on the stepback when she tried to "rescue" Nell. Mine were there, too. She could've gotten away, would have . . .

Thunder pounded the sky, and I remembered something in the antique shop that didn't fit. Something brand-new.

Gale force wind warnings saturated the airwaves as I made the drive into the far corners of Poke County, back to Nell's Elegant Junk. I skidded into the gravel drive, avoiding tree limbs blowing like tumbleweed across the road.

The sheriff had strung the entire place with yellow tape and turned on the neon sign, which now flashed a permanent CLOSED. I went under the tape, used the key Merry had found in her shorts pocket, and unlocked the door. One of Merry's dragon drawings drifted to the floor. I couldn't chance turning on any lights, but there was still enough daylight left to see Jeb's stepback where the sheriff had left it. The burly mass stood near the bottom step like a neurosis. But it looked different. The brunette wood had been cleaned and polished, even around the broken glass that stuck in the upper cabinet doors.

I noticed the stairway. Dark smears stained the worn carpet on the steps—but the killer had wiped her weapon clean. No fingerprints, no evidence.

I tugged at the bottom drawer of the stepback, spit out a choice four letter word, and bent down behind the chest, thinking I could reach in from underneath. It was boarded almost to the floor, where traces of bright pink flaked across the back lower edge. Bubblegum pink—the color of Rosalie's shoes, new except for the dark scuffmarks across the

toe of each one. She'd been nearly flush with the stepback when she stood behind it ready to push after she'd somehow coaxed Nell up the stairs, leaving gravity to do the rest of the damage. She'd used the strength of her entire body to push the thing over and had caught her feet just under the back of the chest as it went down.

"Thought that was your pickup out there." I hadn't heard her walk in. I moved toward the side of the stepback. The pink shoes stood out in the gloom of the antique shop, pointy bright triangles, with the scuffmarks still on them. Even murderers can't think of everything, I thought. Rosalie hid her hands behind her back. "It's such a pity, 'bout Nell," she said, her eyes wandering over the stairs. Thunder rattled a chandelier, a stack of china. "Merry okay?"

"She's fine." I leaned against the front of the stepback. All I needed were the cotton-picking shoes.

"I want my girl, Murdock," she said. "I used to be a nurse, and I'm a good friend of Nell's, a responsible citizen. I've met Merry's mom and dad. I know it'd be best if I had complete charge over her till they can come get her. Hancil's gone over to your place to get her now; then he's comin' back here to pick me up. I hope to God you didn't leave that child alone."

"I know all about the miscarriages, Rosalie. The botched adoption, the felony."

"I'm appealing that," she said.

"You also intend to appeal a murder charge?"

"You can't prove that."

I glanced down at the shoes, and she shoved me against the stepback so hard it rocked backward, hit a chandelier, and toppled against a bulky upright piano stacked haphazardly with dishes. I scooted around on the floor and pulled myself up on the piano bench. She landed against a sofa leg, grimacing, holding her lower lumbar.

"Was it so bad, Rosalie?" I said, breathless, mad. "Were you so desperate for a child that you had to kill Nell Hopper for the chance to kidnap her niece? Why murder? Why not just a kidnapping charge? Why didn't you just take Merry and flee?"

Her cat eyes darted around the shop, then landed on me. "Nell had to be gotten rid of, and it was too easy. I went on and on over that walnut piece, asked her to show me how the desk folded out. On the way up, I dropped a quarter. She picked it up and—well, she had to be gotten rid of. That's all. She woulda been the first one to go blabbing to the police. I'm the only neighbor, I woulda had a good half day to get away if you hadn't come along, nobody woulda known—"

She tried to get up, and I lunged forward, snatching a shoe off her foot as she headed for the front door. She stopped and turned around. "I did not intend for Merry to find Nell. Hancil was supposed to flag the girl down on her way back from the store, keep her at the trailer. He botched everything." Her voice collided with a thunderous boom. "I had a right! It was my *right* to be a mother, it is not a sin to love a child!" She was hobbling toward the door. "Merry was all I ever wanted." I

watched her shadow limp into the rain.

A flash of lightning skittered across the shop, illuminating the entire room with a sharp white blaze, and for an instant I saw the stepback lying on its side against the piano, shards of porcelain scattered beneath it. A jagged edge split the middle of the lower cabinet, and the bottom drawer was jutting a third of the way out.

I crawled toward the stepback and slid my hand into the shallow dark crevice, feeling a packet of folded papers rubber-banded together. I pulled out the packet, took off the rubber band, and unfolded a set of drawings. The one on top was a drawing of a baby dragon in a playpen by America Joyce Brumbeck, age three, and there were more she'd drawn at ages four, five, and six. Dragons in ballerina costumes, standing on their heads, blowing bubbles. Beautiful dragons. All of them were labeled at the top: To Uncle Jeb.

I sat on the lower staircase flipping through the drawings, looking for something more. I turned the first drawing over and found a note written in black ink:

*Dear Jeb,
Our agreement with my sister has
worked out for the best. She has
your eyes.*

Love, Nell

I wrapped the drawings back in the rubber band, picked up the shoe, and walked out onto the porch, letting the sacred, undeniable truth sink in. The truth that Merry's real

mom and dad were Nell Hopper and Jeb Murdock, that the folks she thought were her real parents, the doctors, were Nell's sister and brother-in-law. The agreement.

No wonder Nell had bought the stepback. She'd wanted something of Jeb's for her daughter.

I was surprised Jeb had fathered a child, not surprised he'd never told me. I guess I'd always been afraid to ask, afraid to believe the possibility existed. My strongest ties with Jeb had always centered around his work, where I'd held up the investigative end of his criminal cases. It was something he'd said I had a knack for. That had been Jeb's saving grace, his way of making congenial conversation.

He'd also had eyes that could stir you. And that was the real surprise, that I hadn't figured it out sooner, looking at his reflection in Merry's brown-eyed gaze.

I drove home through a pouring rain as fast as I could to check on Merry, my stepdaughter. I figured Rosalie was crouching somewhere under a thicket of briars waiting for the ever-reliable Hancil to come to her aid.

The poplars in Prudie's front yard were swaying like palm trees. The El Camino, still packed, was illegally parked across the street. I wiped the raindrops from my eyes as I jogged across the yard.

"Prudie! Merry!" My knuckles banged against the door just as Prudie opened it holding a crusted bottle of rum. I fell into the living room scanning the house for Hancil, who was sitting at the kitchen table with a case of the hiccups, holding a

tall drink of what I took to be Prudie's triple Long Island Tea. I could tell he was intoxicated by the way he tried to stand up to greet me. Merry was sound asleep on the sofa, Prudie's striped afghan wrapped around her.

The sheriff was there within half an hour to escort Hancil to the squad car. He slurred claims of being guilty but henpecked, a defense I suspected would not hold up in a court of law.

Two days later, after the burial, the doctors Brumbeck stood beside their white rental car thanking me profusely for the care of their daughter. "I guess I'm goin' to Guatemala," Merry told me; then, "Friends write each other, it's a rule." She sounded like a proper schoolteacher.

I bent down to her level. "I'll al-

ways be your friend, Merry, but I've got to know one thing. Why do you draw dragons all the time?"

She eyed me, then tilted her head. "Because people are afraid of them. Some people even think they're not real. But if you find one and get to know it, they aren't so bad after all, and they can even be your best friend." She beamed as if she'd just revealed the secret of the universe.

"Really?" was all I could get through the lump in my throat. She nodded and handed me a drawing—two dragons holding hands, each with the letter *M* stamped on their bulging yellow chests.

Merry waved to me from inside the car while Prudie stood on her porch sniffing and wadding a blue Kleenex. I could've sworn I heard her elderly voice mutter, "God bless America."

Till Death Us Do Part

Patricia Hughes

Granny Grace couldn't stop my sister's wedding, but she did succeed in postponing it: she died. Despite Savannah's histrionics, Grandpa refused to put his mother on ice while he jetted off to give away his eldest granddaughter into connubial bliss. So instead of flying east for New York nuptials, I headed west to pay my final respects to Granny.

Donner House presided over its acreage with nothing but a single tree to block its view of grazing cattle and pumping wells. I had no sooner climbed the steps than I had the first indication that this trip was going to be even more bizarre than usual: an icy hand touched my shoulder. I know that sounds like something Nana Nelle might say, but that's what it felt like. I decided I was overwrought.

Nana greeted me warmly. "It's high time you got here, Dallas." (Mother had this thing for naming daughters after the place where she met their fathers. I've always been grateful she didn't meet Daddy in Bull Head City or Buffalo.)

"It's nice to see you, too, Nana."

"Do something with your sister!"

I would have preferred an easier task, like teaching ballet to a longhorn.

Savannah had locked herself in what used to be her bedroom and was doing her best to get into the *Guinness Book of Records* for nonstop bawling. I had raised my hand to knock when Savannah screeched, "That old goat planned this! She didn't have to die now!"

While it's true Granny was dead set against the marriage, I had difficulty believing we should take that literally. I lowered my hand without knocking, turned, and walked into Granny's room instead.

Granny's belongings lay where she'd left them. I fingered a ball of yarn from her knitting basket. A tear slid down my cheek.

"Well, it's nice to know someone cared!" A voice behind my back startled me. "I knew I could count on you, Dallas," said a young woman swathed in a fringed red chemise with matching headband and beads nearly down to her knees.

"What are you doing in here?"

"I spent a good portion of my life in here."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Really, Dallas! Don't you recognize your Granny Grace?"

My Granny Grace? I was deciding what to do about this psycho when she said, "All right. If you must see."

Right before my eyes she shifted into the shape of the old woman I had known. My knees didn't take time to shake. They simply folded me ungracefully to the floor.

"Now, Dallas, you can't possibly be afraid of your great-granny." She faded, then popped back as the flapper. "Much better. Looking twenty-one again is the best part of being dead." She floated up and hovered over the desk. "This is grand! Nothing hurts!"

I pulled myself to my feet. "How come you're not knocking on the Pearly Gates, looking for Great-grandpa Rhett?"

"All in due time." She dropped into a more normal position. "First, we have to do something about Savannah. She's about to marry a reprobate."

"It runs in the family. Why are you so excited about this particular one?"

"He's a St. James."

"A very prominent family, not to mention filthy rich."

"Filthy's the word all right. That's how the old man made it—bootlegging, gambling, prostitution, and a few other rackets to boot. I'll die before I'll see a St. James in this family."

"You did."

"Don't sass your elders."

"Savannah is determined to marry Langston St. James. Just because his great-grandfather was a crook doesn't mean he is."

"Trust me. That polished veneer is covering the same sleazy genes. We're going to stop this wedding."

We? I didn't like the sound of that. "Granny, it's been very nice seeing you so . . . ah . . . young and spunky, but I'd really rather remember you the way you were: Savannah never listens to me anyway."

"Not so fast, Dallas. I've been checking out this ghost stuff."

"You always did keep up with the times."

"Some of it is very liberating, but it has drawbacks. You pretty well have to be attached to something—a house, a person, something. I've latched onto you."

"Me?"

"There's no reason to haunt the house. It's not going to the wedding."

I ran a mental check of acceptable reasons for my not going either. It didn't take long: death or the intensive care unit. Being kidnapped by terrorists was just a maybe. Anything less I would hear about until Mother's dying breath.

Mother had completely rescheduled the wedding before the intended groom arrived for the funeral. (She is frightfully efficient at whatever she does except choosing husbands.) Of course, Savannah took full credit. She'd managed a complete metamorphosis for Langston's benefit.

Overall, Granny was pleased with her official sendoff to the Great Beyond, even though she'd opted not to go, but her mood darkened when we returned home. She was bobbing around trying to dump Langston's drink

in his lap, but her hand passed right through it. Obviously, only I could see her.

The epitome of confidence, Langston stood tall, tanned, and muscular. Sex appeal oozed from his pores—so slick I was amazed he could stand up, let alone that Savannah could hold onto him. He was buttering Mother and Nana Nelle like a stack of flapjacks, and they were getting all syrupy.

Langston eased the conversation over to state politics, all the while feeling out Grandpa's political clout. "We're going to live here in Texas. I love the fresh air and open spaces."

I opened a window. The heavy odor of crude oil tinged with the sour, weedy scent of manure tumbled off the breeze. Savannah slammed it shut. "We're going to live in *Austin*."

Open spaces? I suppose everything is relative.

"Although," she continued, "I don't know why. I think we should live on the East Coast." Occasionally Savannah has a good idea.

"I want Savannah to be near her family. Besides," Langston chuckled, brushing back his sunbleached hair with a well-manicured hand, "following our wives has become a St. James tradition. My brothers are scattered all over the country. We still manage to stay close."

"And politically active," I added. Alarms buzzed in my head. Langston's father remained extremely influential in New York, while all his brothers had married heiresses from politically prominent families in different states—California, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Ohio. "Your relatives might add up to a lot of electoral votes."

"Dallas!" Savannah glared at me. Mother's mouth fell open, Grandpa frowned, and Langston fell silent. Nana just looked puzzled and ate another chocolate.

"That's my girl," beamed Granny. "Go for it." Instead I took my drink out on the porch. Langston followed—on what pretense, I'm not sure.

He grinned. "I wouldn't want you to get the wrong impression."

"Do you think there's a chance that'll happen?"

"You're a possibility thinker. Maybe I picked the wrong sister." He moved closer.

"You'd best stick to the pretty one."

"You look pretty good to me." He moved closer still.

I backed away. "Aren't you concerned that I might talk to Savannah?"

"Not especially." Smugness danced through his eyes and curled up on one side of his lip.

"I guess not," I said. "You do seem to be one of those critters that can come out lookin' like a stallion when he's just acted like a jackass."

I turned and headed for my room. From the corner of my eye I saw Langston's drink jerk and splash him. Granny was getting better.

Traveling across country with a ghost puts a new perspective on ev-

everything. First of all, it's somewhat unnerving to be walking around with someone no one else can see, and it can be embarrassing if anyone catches you talking to thin air. Furthermore, one learns things one might prefer not to—like who had a cardiac on the plane last month and is still flying around looking for his luggage, or who was murdered in the bed you're sleeping in and doesn't know she's dead. I changed rooms twice.

Unlike the sprawling cities of Texas, New York stacks its inhabitants on top of each other. Below, in its concrete canyons, the populace ebbs and flows in rushing rivers of uncertain current. Langston rode those elements smugly buoyed by wealth and power, certain that everything would go his way as usual.

I was getting claustrophobic, and Granny was driving me crazy. "You have to help me, Dallas!"

"I've already talked to Savannah. It didn't do any good. Why don't you go haunt her instead of me?"

"I tried that. She neither sees nor hears me. Your mother and Nelle think he's wonderful, and your grandfather's caught up in the idea of political empires. I thought I raised him better than that."

"Doesn't Savannah have a right to make her own mistakes?"

"If she were standing on a track with a freight train coming, wouldn't you push her out of the way?"

"Probably. Then I'd get hit by the train, and she'd yell at me for musing her hair and makeup." I was losing patience, and I had never understood the depth of Granny's concern. "Why are you so worried about this marriage, anyway? It's not going to last any longer than her first one, and if you really want to see Langston get what he deserves, just wait and see what Savannah does to him during the divorce."

Granny disappeared in a puff of black smoke.

I didn't see much of her for the next couple of hours, but I did find my mascara in the toilet and my red underwear flapping in the breeze from the balcony railing.

St. James Enterprises had just moved into a sparkling new skyscraper. Nana Nelle had already toured that, oohing every step of the way, but she had also taken an interest in the demolition of the old St. James Building. Grandpa wriggled out of taking her to see it by assigning me the task. That shouldn't have been so bad. I rather like old buildings, but traipsing around one with an unwilling ghost is not my idea of a good time.

The old St. James Building was fenced off from the public, so Nana and I stood on the sidewalk peering through the fence.

Nana stared intently. "Isn't that interesting?" she remarked as she always does when she hasn't the foggiest idea what she's talking about.

I was disappointed. Instead of the stately old edifice I had anticipated, the building was one of those soulless Art Deco monstrosities. Actually it wasn't exactly soulless.

Granny Grace popped out of the sidewalk. "Dallas, I apologize for questioning your instincts. Monty knows everything about Langston and his cronies." My instincts? Monty?

I distanced myself from Nana Nelle and everyone else that I could and whispered through my teeth, "What are you talking about?"

It turns out that Monty was an old business associate of Mickey St. James. The grand old patriarch had personally put six slugs into Monty and saved him for posterity by burying him under the foundation of his brand-new office building. Brand-new some seventy years ago.

"Monty just can't bear to leave without a proper burial, so he's still here. And guess what else, Miss Smarty?" said Granny. "He said the corpses are still piling up."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know."

"Then go find out."

Granny disappeared, and Nana waddled over. "They absolutely will not let us in, Dallas. We might as well go back to the hotel."

"Uh, not yet, Nana. Come over here and look through this little gap."

She complied. "What am I supposed to see?"

"Why, the beauty of the stark symmetry. Look at the parallelism of the windows."

"Oh yes," she nodded. "That's very interesting. They're all so . . . so . . ."

"Rectangular," I supplied.

By the time even Nana could be stalled no longer, Granny Grace had piled up enough dirt on the St. James family to challenge Everest, and Langston was burrowing right through the middle of it. Granny filled me in back at the hotel. Most of it had to do with underhanded business deals and political power plays—but some of the things Granny told me were unsettling.

"Now do you see how dangerous these people are?" said Granny.

"They do seem to have an abnormally high number of close associates who are in poor health and prone to either accidents or suicide."

"I knew you couldn't hatch swans from buzzard eggs."

"Savannah won't believe it. There's not one shred of evidence. Besides, I'm not sure it would make a difference. Savannah's not that smart."

"Did you know Langston had been married before?"

"No. And I don't think Savannah does. That's something we can use."

"Not really. He's smooth enough to talk his way out of that little oversight. They were only married forty-eight hours before the inappropriate little thing was found floating in the family pool. The family wasn't happy with his selection."

"I don't think Langston's going to be so happy with his selection when the knot is tied and his perfect mate reverts to the real Savannah."

"She's definitely not as docile as he thinks."

"And worse—I remember telling you to wait and see what Savannah

does during the divorce, only I no longer see him tolerating the damage a messy divorce would inflict on his debonair image. On the other hand, he could perfectly play the handsome, bereaved widower, harvesting a substantial sympathy vote from yet another unfortunate tragedy."

"Dallas, you have to push Savannah off that track. She hasn't got the good sense to see the train coming."

"True. But logic or fear won't work with Savannah. You have to go straight for vanity." I thought awhile. "Maybe we should attend Langston's bachelor party."

We soon learned that the St. James men don't give parties. They have orgies. Lots of women and very few clothes attended.

My job with the caterer cost me two hundred dollars, plus I didn't get paid. I did get pinched, poked, and tickled.

The faster the drinks were poured, the louder the music. Langston didn't recognize me. The red wig did the trick. Of course, the quantity of booze he consumed worked in my favor, too.

Langston was nuzzling a voluptuous blonde with a pout on her face. "You have to understand, Bunny," he slurred. "This wedding doesn't have to change anything between us. It's a political thing."

I proceeded to discreetly snap a few shots with my itsy-bitsy camera that fits in my pocket. Discretion is easy when one's subject is so drunk he can't see beyond his nose—or the navel he's stuck it in.

"Come on," said Granny. "I found out which boudoir is reserved for the guest of honor. Bring the tape."

The challenge was not so much getting into the bedroom unobserved as it was getting through the crowd without having my clothes ripped off.

"Hey, sugar. Put that tray down, and I'll show you a real good time." A hand reached out and grabbed my arm.

"No way." Another hand pulled me in the opposite direction. "The lady is with me."

Being haunted has its moments. Granny slipped an ice cube down the front of the trousers of both ardent admirers.

I finally made it to the bedroom and slid a small tape recorder under the bed. "I've got to get back to the party. Granny, you stay here and operate this thing. They can't see you."

"All right."

"And, Granny, no funny stuff. Inanimate objects are not supposed to move. If you start horsin' around, you won't have anything to show Savannah. Just turn the recorder on at the right time."

"Humph!"

At that moment the door opened. Langston and Bunny stumbled in. Bunny's giggle trailed into a frown when she saw me. "Who are you?"

Fortunately I still had my tray. "One of the caterers," I replied in my best attempt at a Brooklyn accent. "I was just leaving youse guys some champagne. Enjoy."

I placed the drinks on the bedside table and left. One good thing about growing up with Savannah is that you learn to think on your feet.

By four A.M. I was stepping over half naked bodies that dozed amidst empty bottles, glasses, and the remains of food. A couple of people had thrown up. The sour stench mingled with the odor of spilled champagne and scotch bounced off the leftover anchovy dip and did cartwheels around my stomach. The real caterers were long gone. I was the only person left standing, and I had plenty of film. The sleeping duo, Langston and Bunny, looked particularly photogenic, all bared and sweetly intertwined. I even took a closeup of his fancy, dated watch.

I got some very strange looks at the all-night one-hour photo place.

"These are grand," said Granny as we looked through the prints, "and I guarantee the tape will get her dander up."

When we reached the hotel, we found Savannah snoring. I quietly set the tape recorder on her nightstand, spread the photos across the bed, and started for the door. "Aren't you going to stick around to see what happens?" asked Granny.

"I know what's going to happen, Granny," I whispered. "You turn on the tape. You're already dead."

It wasn't long before Savannah's shrieks registered about seven point five on the Richter scale, which was nothing compared to the intensity she hit when she saw Langston. I almost felt sorry for him. Savannah's rage was a lot to endure with a hangover as big as his ego.

At Granny's insistence we left Langston cowering before Savannah and returned to the St. James Building to thank Monty. The edifice lay crumpled, reduced to dusty rubble. Experts had blown the old girl's underpinnings, collapsing her safely on top of herself. I watched workmen hauling away chunks of her with heavy equipment. Granny had disappeared.

Suddenly she burst through the sidewalk. "Dallas, look!"

"Would you stop that!" I said, much too loud.

People stared. I smiled and moved aside.

"The foundation is exposed! Monty's right there!" Granny shoved my face to the gap, leaned through the fence, and pointed. "If they'd just chip away at that corner, they'd find him."

I tried the teeth talk again. "They're not chipping anything, Granny. They're knocking hell out of it."

"They can't do that. They'll pulverize him. He'll never get a decent burial."

The workman thought I was crazy, but for a hundred bucks he didn't care. He stopped laughing when he removed a chunk of concrete and brushed away some soil and Monty's skull stared back at him.

That was my cue to disappear. I wasn't hanging around to explain how a ghost told me about Monty.

All was right with the world. Mother began systematically returning

wedding gifts. Granny was so ecstatic she spent most of the time bouncing around the ceiling upside-down.

In order to soothe her frazzled nerves and mend her broken heart, Savannah had gone on the would-be honeymoon cruise with Nana Nelle in attendance. That allowed Grandpa to puff his way into oblivion with all the cigars that Nana wouldn't let him touch when she was around.

Langston dropped by to bid me farewell. (Wasn't that sweet?) He had the strangest idea I was somehow responsible for Savannah's current mood. He handed me a newspaper. "What do you know about this?"

"It says they received an anonymous note with words cut from old newspapers, saying that the bones in your old building belonged to one Monty McDougal."

"It says my great-grandfather shot him."

"Chill out, Langston. They can't execute your great-grandfather. He's already dead. The police aren't remotely interested."

"The media is interested."

"So it seems."

"Perhaps you've never realized how well I know some of your employer's most important clients, Dallas."

"Thanks for your concern, but not to worry. I have some great photos. If I run into cash flow problems, I can always part with a few to the *National Enquirer*."

Langston paled right through his tan.

Just in case he might be worried about my physical safety, I also assured him that I had a friend who would take good care of those photos should anything unforeseen befall my person.

The next day Monty's elderly daughter claimed his remains, and I feel certain that Monty has gone on to his reward. Granny, on the other hand, came home with me, and now she says she can't depart for the next world from any place other than Donner House. "I might miss Rhett."

If I ask her why she didn't just go back with Mother and Nana and Grandpa, she ignores me.

In the meantime, life with Granny Grace is somewhat akin to taking up housekeeping on a rollercoaster. I never know when she's going to pop up between my nose and my date's.

I just hope that, when I finally get some time off to take Granny back to Donner House, Great-grandpa Rhett will be waiting with open arms. Otherwise I have this chilling notion that Granny just might hang around until I go through the Pearly Gates with her.

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



Mystery readers with a taste for historical settings will undoubtedly warm to Karen Harper's **The Poyson Garden** (Delacorte, \$21.95), which marks the debut of a new series starring Bess Tudor. If the heroine's name escapes you, perhaps you'll recognize her as the future monarch, Queen Elizabeth I of England, daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn and younger half-sister of Queen Mary ("Bloody Mary"). When the novel opens, Bess is a young woman exiled to a country estate, trying to stay out of her ruling sister's way (she's had one narrow escape from the Tower already) and biding her time until she can regain the monarchy for the Boleyns. Mary, whose husband is the King of Spain, is childless and reputedly not well, so Bess's prospects for rulership look fairly strong. Until, that is, an attempted murder and subsequent events convince Bess there's a devilish plot to destroy her and any hopes the Boleyns may have to royal ascension. This cosy with a novel setting has a cast of lively and loyal anti-conspirators led by a protagonist whom readers will want to see back again.

Michael Connelly's **Angels Flight** (Little, Brown, \$25) takes its title from a hill in downtown Los Angeles traversed by a commuter train. For homicide detective Harry Bosch, it's also a murder site. As the train conductor makes the last run of the night, he finds two people brutally murdered in the railway car. One of them is the black attorney Howard Elias, whose career of lodging civil suits against L.A.'s police force has made him both wealthy and famous. To many poor Angelenos, Elias was a savior. These folks are certain Elias was struck down by a cop, especially since the lawyer was killed just days before he was to head into a newsworthy and controversial trial. Bosch must race to find the truth before an angry city sets itself aflame.

Larry Millett (*Sherlock Holmes and the Red Demon*) has discovered a second heretofore hidden work penned by the notable John H. Watson, M.D. **Sherlock Holmes and the Ice Palace Murders** (Viking,

\$23) is the second investigation that has brought the great Victorian detective and his trusty sidekick and chronicler to America. The year is 1896 and the weather in Minnesota is frightful, but the case is intriguing enough to lure Holmes from his comfy English hearth. The son of a St. Paul tycoon was about to marry the city's loveliest heiress in the Winter Carnival's ice palace when he suddenly disappeared just days before the ceremony. There's plenty of ice construction lore, several chilling action scenes (pun intended), and a colorful local named Shad Rafferty who dares to match wits with Holmes. Millett's adventure remains true to the Holmes tradition—he spins a surprising yarn in an original setting, promising to satisfy Arthur Conan Doyle fans as well as newcomers.

Dorothy Gilman, author of the beloved Mrs. Pollifax series, has written a charming little puzzler titled **Thale's Folly** (Ballantine, \$19.95). Young Andrew Thale, author of two mystery novels, now suffers the double ignominy of writer's block and menial employment in the Manhattan corporate offices where his father is a powerful executive. Under his father's orders, Andrew travels hours into the countryside to look at a neglected piece of property left to the family by his great Aunt Harriet, the proverbial free spirit and black sheep. What he finds there is an eccentric and lovable band of squatters (including a lovely young orphan) whose philosophy is best summed up by their senior member: "Once—long ago—I met with Reality," she says, "and found it so pitiless and chilling that I have taken great care to avoid it ever since." If you share the sentiment, you're guaranteed to enjoy an escape into this magical corner of Massachusetts.

Nevada Barr's latest Anna Pigeon mystery is a real change of pace, for **Liberty Falling** (Putnam, \$23.95) pulls the park ranger out of her favorite haunts in the desert and woods and deposits her in the asphalt jungle of Manhattan. Anna is on a leave of absence because her sister Molly is gravely ill in a New York City hospital. While sharing staff quarters with a friend on Ellis Island, where park rangers assigned to the Statue of Liberty are housed, she finds herself roaming among the abandoned and derelict buildings that once made up the immigration receiving headquarters for the entire country. Although distracted, Anna can't ignore the pattern emerging from events occurring in the shadow of Lady Liberty: the inexplicable suicide of a teenager, the death of a ranger working as night watchman, the disappearance of another young worker, even rumors of ghostly activities. As always, you can look to Barr for insider detail, adult emotional content, and vivid and authentic action scenes.

THE STORY THAT WON

The February Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Greg Matejek of Belle Mead, New Jersey. Honorable mentions go to Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Richard Howard of Conway, Arkansas; Laurie Hill of Brookline, New Hampshire; Randy Carver of San Diego, California; Jan Streilein of Aiken, South



Carolina; Robert H. Wynn of Young's Point, Ontario, Canada; Rodney B. Hastings of Natalbany, Louisiana; Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas; David Gott of Beaverton, Oregon; James Sweatt of Metropolis, Illinois; Ila R. Winslow of Portland, Oregon; and Christopher Milne of Concord, California.

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

HOLDING UP THE WALL by Greg Matejek

"That's nonsense!" shouts the irritated Sergeant Malloy to his street patrolmen. "You mean that guy says he's holding up the wall, he won't let anyone near the building, and that's why we have this crowd in the street blocking traffic? How can you guys be so stupid! That wall's not going to fall. Come on, it's time to put a stop to this."

The castigated officers follow the sergeant across the sidewalk towards the man by the wall.

"What do you think you're doing?" demands Malloy.

"Why, sir," answers the gentleman politely, "I'm just trying to help hold up the wall."

"That's ridiculous. The only way this wall will fall down is if I push you through it, which is what I'll do if you don't leave immediately."

The man stares at the infuriated sergeant, then looks at his watch.

"I guess you're right. It would have fallen by now. Sorry if I caused a problem for you. 'Bye now.'"

The man melts into the crowd, and the sergeant orders his officers to disperse the crowd. A police captain approaches the sergeant and demands to know what happened. After the sergeant explains, the captain explodes in anger.

"You mean while you guys were fooling around with this nut the crime of the year was being committed right around the corner?"

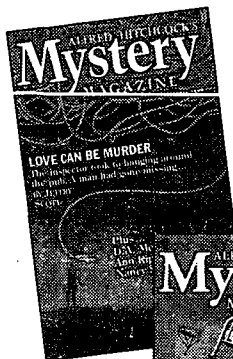
"Crime? What crime?"

"What crime?" shouts the captain. "The Wall Jewelry Exchange! It was HELD UP!"

MYSTERY VALUE PACK

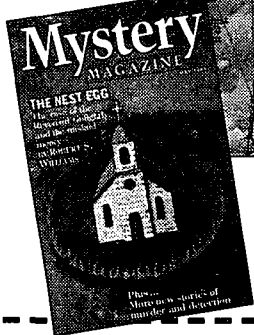
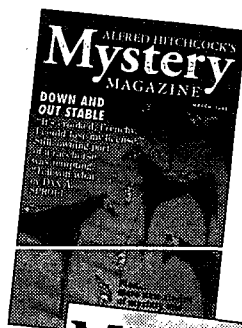
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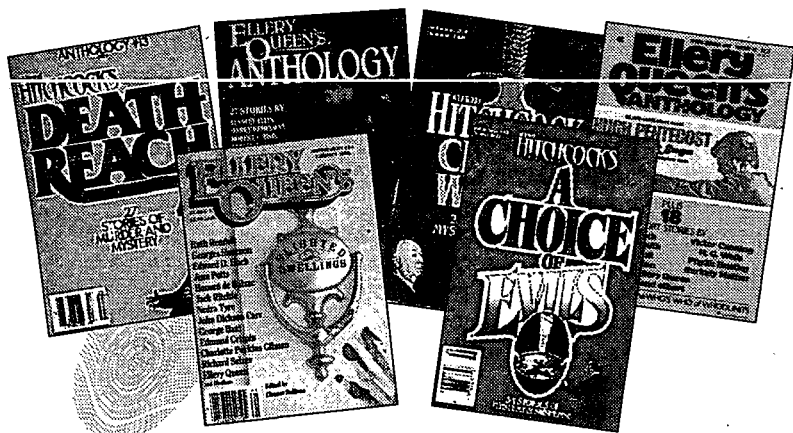
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SKIN CARE UPDATE

The "hidden" problem that forces millions of women to wear pants... and the natural solution!

Formerly available only through dermatologists, this amazing cream eliminates ugly spider veins in just weeks.

by Melinda Walthington



It's estimated that half of the adult female population is plagued by spider veins! Small, thin veins lying close to the skin's surface, spider veins are red or blue in color. They may appear in true "spider" fashion, with web-like

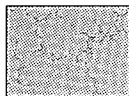
groups of veins radiating out from a central area, they can look like fine lines or appear in "starburst" clusters. Although men are not immune to spider veins, they are overwhelmingly a female problem. Unlike large, bulging varicose veins that can cause pain and even lead to serious health problems, spider veins are primarily a cosmetic problem.

Not even proper diet and exercise are guaranteed to prevent unsightly spider veins. They tend to be hereditary, and worsen as we age. Aside from changing the way you dress, using concealing makeup or resorting to expensive treatments, there has been little you could do to get rid of spider veins—until now!

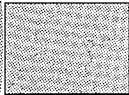
Secret weapon. Formerly available only through plastic surgeons and dermatologists, professional-strength Dermal-K eliminates spider veins—without painful shots or expensive treatments! This unique cream can make embarrassing veins disappear in just weeks, painlessly, easily and inexpensively.

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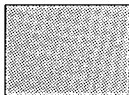
Apply Dermal-K to moistened skin twice a day and those ugly spider veins will be



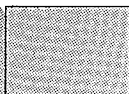
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Going...



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